

"Maxims in Old English Poetry"

by Paul Cavill, BA, MPhil

Thesis submitted to the University of Nottingham
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, October 1996



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ABSTRACT

The focus of the thesis is on maxims and gnomes in Old English poetry, but the occasional occurrence of these forms of expression in Old English prose and in other Old Germanic literature is also given attention, particularly in the earlier chapters.

Chapters 1 to 3 are general, investigating a wide range of material to see how and why maxims were used, then to define the forms, and distinguish them from proverbs. The conclusions of these chapters are that maxims are 'nomic', they organise experience in a conventional, authoritative fashion. They are also 'proverbial' in the sense of being recognisable and repeatable, but they do not have the fixed form of proverbs.

Chapters 4 to 7 are more specific in their focus, applying techniques from formulaic theory, paroemiology and the sociology of knowledge to the material so as to better understand how maxims are used in their contexts in the poems, and to appreciate the nature and function of the Maxims collections. The conclusions reached here are that the maxims in Beowulf 183b-88 are integral to the poem, that maxims in The Battle of Maldon show how the poet manipulated the social functions of the form for his own purposes, that there is virtually no paganism in Old English maxims, and that the Maxims poems outline and illustrate an Anglo-Saxon world view.

The main contribution of the thesis is that it goes beyond traditional commentary in analysing the purpose and function of maxims. It does not merely focus on individual poems, but attempts to deal with a limited aspect of the Old English oral and literary tradition. The primary aim is to understand the general procedures of the poets in using maxims and compiling compendia of them, and then to apply insights gained from theoretical approaches to the specifics of poems.

ABBREVIATIONS

I. TITLES OF POEMS

Alm Alms-Giving

And Andreas

Aza Azarias

Brb The Battle of Brunanburh

Bwf Beowulf

Chr Christ

Dan Daniel

FtM The Fortunes of Men

Gen Genesis

GfM The Gifts of Men

Glc Guthlac

Hm1 Homiletic Fragment I

Jg2 Judgment Day II

MB The Meters of Boethius

MCh The Metrical Charms

Mld The Battle of Maldon

Mx1 Maxims I

Mx2 Maxims II

P The Metrical Psalms of the Paris Psalter

Phx The Phoenix

<u>Pra</u>	<u>A Prayer</u>
<u>Run</u>	<u>The Rune Poem</u>
<u>Sfr</u>	<u>The Seafarer</u>
<u>SnS</u>	<u>Solomon and Saturn</u>
<u>Wan</u>	<u>The Wanderer</u>
<u>WfL</u>	<u>The Wife's Lament</u>
<u>XSt</u>	<u>Christ and Satan</u>

II. OTHER TEXTS

<u>DP</u>	<u>The Durham Proverbs</u>
<u>Hel</u>	<u>The Heliand</u>
<u>Mus</u>	<u>Muspilli</u>
<u>OSG</u>	<u>The Old Saxon Genesis</u>

III. OTHER WORKS FREQUENTLY CITED

Arngart	'The Durham Proverbs' (1981)
<u>ASE</u>	<u>Anglo-Saxon England</u>
<u>ASPR</u>	<u>The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records</u>
Bethurum	<u>The Homilies of Wulfstan</u>
Bosworth-Toller	<u>An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary</u>
Calder and Allen	<u>Sources and Analogues of Old English Poetry</u>
<u>Companion to Old English Poetry</u>	
ed. by Aertsen and Bremmer	

Continuations and Beginnings

ed. by Stanley

Damico and Olsen New Readings on Women in Old English LiteratureDronke The Poetic Edda, Volume 1: Heroic Poems

EETS OS Early English Text Society, Ordinary Series

EETS SS Early English Text Society, Supplementary Series

Greenfield and Evert

'Maxims II: Gnome and Poem'HE Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People, ed.
by Colgrave and MynorsHowe The Old English Catalogue Poems

'"Is" and "Ought"' Nelson, '"Is" and "Ought" in the Exeter Book Maxims'

JEGP Journal of English and Germanic PhilologyLarrington A Store of Common SenseLiebermann Die Gesetze der Angelsachsen'Maxims' Shippey, 'Maxims in Old English Narrative: Literary Art
or Traditional Wisdom?'MLN Modern Language NotesMLR Modern Language Review

Nicholson and Frese

Anglo-Saxon Poetry: Essays in Appreciation for John C.
McGalliardNM Neuphilologische MitteilungenNQ Notes and QueriesPMLA Publications of the Modern Language Association of
America

<u>PWL</u>	Shippey, <u>Poems of Wisdom and Learning in Old English</u>
Robertson	<u>Anglo-Saxon Charters</u>
Skeat	<u>Ælfric's Lives of Saints</u>
<u>Solomon Complex</u>	Hansen, <u>The Solomon Complex</u>
<u>Structures of Opposition</u>	Nelson, <u>Structures of Opposition in Old English Poems</u>
Williams	<u>Gnomic Poetry in Anglo-Saxon</u>
'Wisdom Poetry'	Shippey, ' <u>The Wanderer</u> and <u>The Seafarer</u> as Wisdom Poetry'

PREFACE

INTENTIONS

Work on Old English maxims has reached a certain stasis. From Blanche Colton Williams's edition of the Maxims poems in 1914,¹ through to the more recent edition of Poems of Wisdom and Learning in Old English by T. A. Shippey,² the work of Elaine Tuttle Hansen bringing a wisdom literature perspective,³ and Carolyn Larrington bringing a perspective from Old Norse wisdom,⁴ the emphasis has been on commentary. Commentary uses traditional literary techniques and has traditional literary preoccupations: theme, structure, aesthetic effectiveness. But if literary history teaches us anything in relation to maxims, and the Maxims poems in particular, it is that literary techniques fail as adequate tools for the analysis of these poems. Larrington's comments on The Wife's Lament typify the tiredness of commentators. Referring to lines 42-50a, she writes:

What is the purpose of this apparently arbitrary comment? The movement of thought seems to be as follows: the speaker considers the qualities desirable in a young man under all circumstances, and then, in the syntactically parallel pair of clauses introduced by 'sy' ... 'sy', contrasts the 'geong mon' who is able to find happiness in the world through his own efforts, with the lot of the man exiled and unhappy, like the speaker's 'freond'. a transition from gnomic generalization back to the individual only made with difficulty. Conceivably

the tradition of gnomic reflection in lament had become so conventional that it was felt a moral had to be tacked on somewhere, contextual incongruity notwithstanding.

The poem concludes with another gnome: ‘Wā bið þām
þe sceal | of langope lēofes ābīdan.’ (52^b-53: Woe is it for
that person who must experience longing for a loved one.).

(pp. 187-88)

Once we have told the story, analysed the syntax, disparaged the taste and ability of the poet, and observed the obvious, some traditional commentary at least is at the limit of its resources.

Another indicator of limitation, if not failure, in the enterprise of analysis of maxims in Old English is the establishment and general acceptance of what I shall call the Third Law of Gnomo-dynamics. Scholars are by now properly familiar with the Second Law of Runo-dynamics which states of a runic inscription that ‘if you don’t understand it it must be magic’.⁵ The Third Law of Gnomo-dynamics is practically the inverse of this, and in my formulation, it states of gnomic verse, ‘if it is obvious what it means, it must mean something else, probably magic’. The last two chapters of the thesis deal with some examples of criticism which embody this as a presupposition.

Scholar after scholar has admitted defeat confronted by the habit of Old English poets of generalising, and of valuing generalisation to the extent that they compiled lists of generalisations. This thesis is born of the attempt to

understand this particular aspect of the Anglo-Saxon mind. My aim has been to examine the questions of the purpose, effect and value of maxims in Old English poetry and society. I have considered the question of why as well as how maxims are used. I have sought to integrate traditional literary concerns with theoretical perspectives from within the discipline and from outside, focusing on certain aspects of oral-formulaic theory, on proverb performance theory and on the sociology of knowledge. In each case, I have brought the theoretical perspective back to the text, or a particular text, with a view to applying insights for the better understanding of poems as poems. All such attempts are partial, and I make no claim to solving all problems relating to maxims in the poetry, but I believe that the results are suggestive of an underlying congruity between my hypotheses and what we might call an Anglo-Saxon poetic. The more theoretical and exciting approaches are detailed in the later chapters, while in the earlier chapters I attempt to ground understanding of maxims in a survey of both prose and poetry, and in adequate definition. For all the work on maxims, there has been little real attempt at definition rather than descriptions of the term or classification of forms.

My two main sets of texts have been The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records⁶ and the Biblia Sacra Latina.⁷ I have always doubted that the aim of Old English poets was to cram as much of the Patrologia Latina into their work as possible, but that many of the poems are deeply Christian and heavily influenced by the Bible seems self-evident. For the Old English texts, I have

attended to manuscript readings but have generally dealt with the accepted edited text, and followed Krapp and Dobbie and other editors in silently expanding contractions; all translations are my own except, and that very seldom, where noted. Every Anglo-Saxonist is indebted to the standard works of Bosworth-Toller and the Microfiche Concordance to Old English.⁸ References to the poems follow the titles established by Krapp and Dobbie, and abbreviated titles are those of the Concordance to the Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records.⁹ These and the other principal primary and secondary texts are abbreviated either by short title or according to the forms set out in the table of abbreviations (pp. vi-ix above). Translations of Norse and Saxon texts are mostly my own, though I have opted for the comparative safety of Dronke's translations for quotations from the Poetic Edda.¹⁰ I have left biblical quotations untranslated, but have given my own versions of non-biblical Latin.

I have drawn on my own work previously published, in the section entitled 'The maxim and the formula' in Chapter 2, and that entitled 'A pre-Christian expression' in Chapter 6; and also to a very limited extent on my University of Hull M. Phil. 'Gnomic Poetry in Old English' (1983), at various points. But the substance of all the present work is new and has been produced under the supervision of Professor Christine Fell.

I would like to thank colleagues in the English Department at the University of Nottingham for encouragement, for helpful comments and for creating an environment in which scholarship is important; the Arts Faculty,

for permission to complete this work in three rather than four years; the Hallward Library for their consistent efficiency; my family for their love and patience. My greatest debt as a student and as an academic is to Professor Fell, the most generous of scholars. Any errors, inconsistencies or absurdities in the thesis are mine; that there is a thesis at all, is due largely to her.

NOTES TO PREFACE

1. Gnomic Poetry in Anglo-Saxon (New York: Columbia University Press, 1914; repr. AMS Press, 1966).
2. (Cambridge: Brewer, 1976).
3. The Solomon Complex: Reading Wisdom in Old English Poetry (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988).
4. A Store of Common Sense: Gnomic Theme and Style in Old Icelandic and Old English Wisdom Poetry (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).
5. See for example the preface to R. I. Page, Runes and Runic Inscriptions: Collected Essays on Anglo-Saxon and Viking Runes, ed. by David Parsons (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1995), p. ix.
6. The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records: A Collective Edition, ed. by George Philip Krapp and Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie, 6 vols (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931-42).
7. Biblia Sacra: Vulgatae Editionis, ed. by Popes Sixtus V and Clement VIII, new edn (London: Nutt, [1868]).
8. An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary, ed. by Joseph Bosworth and T. Northcote Toller (London: Oxford University Press, 1898; repr. 1973), An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary: Supplement, ed. by T. Northcote Toller, with rev. and enlarged addenda by Alistair Campbell [1972] (London: Oxford University Press, 1921; repr. 1980). A Microfiche Concordance to Old English, ed. by Antonette DiPaolo Healey and Richard L. Venezky (University of Delaware, 1980).

9. Ed. by J. B. Bessinger, Jr., programmed by Philip H. Smith, Jr., with an Index of Compounds compiled by Michael W. Twomey (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978; repr. 1980).
10. The Poetic Edda, Volume I: Heroic Poems, ed. by Ursula Dronke (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969).

CHAPTER 1

IMPRESSIONS

‘Every man who has seen the world knows that nothing is so useless as a general maxim’, wrote Lord Macaulay in 1827.¹ The poets of The Wanderer, The Seafarer, and Widsith, to mention only three, might well disagree. Macaulay continues:

If it [sc. the general maxim] be very moral and very true, it may serve for a copy to a charity-boy. If, like those of Rochefoucault, it be sparkling and whimsical, it may make an excellent motto for an essay. But few indeed of the many wise apophthegms which have been uttered, from the time of the Seven Sages of Greece to that of Poor Richard, have prevented a foolish action. We give the highest and the most peculiar praise to the precepts of Machiavelli when we say that they may frequently be of real use in regulating conduct, not so much because they are more just or more profound than those which might be culled from other authors, as because they can be more readily applied to the problems of real life.

In Macaulay’s view, outlined here, maxims are essentially for the purpose of regulating conduct by preventing foolish action, but do not often work, and only good ones (and not necessarily those that are ‘very moral and very true’) readily apply to real life. It is not quite clear whether Macaulay makes any distinction between ‘maxim’, ‘apophthegm’ and ‘precept’, but his preference

for sharp, witty and relevant maxims as against bland generalisations seems clear enough. Presumably he would regard his own generalisation, quoted in the first sentence above, as one of the preferable sort. But Macaulay's imperialistic assumptions are evident at every turn: 'the man who has seen the world' is the one who has the wealth to travel, as against the charity-boy who can be fobbed off with second-hand maxims for his copy-book. 'General maxims' are for the education of the masses and might occasionally prevent folly, while gentlemen are engaged in writing essays, and especially in 'real life', whatever that might be.

The decline in fortunes of the proverb and maxim is observable throughout much of post-medieval literature. Lord Chesterfield, as T. A. Shippey notes,² remarked that 'a man of fashion never has recourse to proverbs'. Jane Austen exploits the maxim to ironic effect when she introduces Pride and Prejudice with the words, 'It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife', and, of course Catherine Morland's maxims culled from the poets hardly prepare her for 'real life' (Northanger Abbey, Chapter 1). The growth of the association of proverbs and maxims with things and persons humorous, vulgar and indiscriminating—charity-boys, perhaps, or before them, Pandarus and Polonius—is not something to be enlarged upon here, but it is all part of a world view which has changed dramatically since Anglo-Saxon times.

The Anglo-Saxon world view is pre-theoretical, and the passage from Macaulay shows very clearly the disdain that theoretical thought generally has for pre-theoretical thought. Theoretical thought is literate, formally educated, analytical, empirical. Pre-theoretical thought is what Walter J. Ong calls 'oral':³ communal, conventional, experiential. It is important to grasp this point, because as I shall show, theoretically-based disdain (though in differing forms) is still prevalent among critics of the Old English corpus of maxims. For the theoretically educated mind, proverbs and maxims are, as Macaulay shows, for ornament or amusement. The maxims at the end of The Wanderer and The Seafarer, and in the Maxims poems themselves are neither ornamental nor amusing. From our theoretically educated perspective we can scarcely imagine that poets could put such banality in their poems, and so we construct hypothetical contexts, stories or backgrounds to give the maxims more meaning than they would otherwise have. But in pre-theoretical thought, maxims are a way of preserving truth, a way of 'thinking memorable thoughts' (Ong p. 34), the very stuff of knowledge, replete with communal values. They are the axioms and derived experiential propositions of a pre-theoretical, but not unsophisticated, philosophy. They are not there for the purpose of deterring foolish behaviour, they are there because they are what people believe, and hence the expression of a corporate reality in which socially approved (or otherwise) behaviour takes its natural and significant place.

The term 'gnomic', with its roots in an Indo-European verb of

knowing, and its more recent borrowing in the nineteenth century from Greek γνῶ-, has served well as a descriptive term for the type of poems that contain maxims. They are statements of knowledge, of what is understood and believed in the society that produces them. The recent trend to embrace within the ‘gnomic’ concept the notion of ‘gnostic’; that is, to assume pagan or esoteric knowledge in the Old English gnomic poems, is regrettable because it marginalises them. The poets do not marginalise maxims, they punctuate their discourse with such observations, they have their characters use them, they collect and compile them in various forms.

What I would like to suggest in this chapter is that a more accurate term than either gnomic or gnostic for these expressions and the poems in which they are collected, is ‘nomic’. For the loss of a consonant (and that one not often pronounced in English), and the change in vowel quality, much is gained. For the word νόμος, Liddell and Scott include such definitions as, ‘any thing assigned or apportioned [...], a usage, custom [...], a law, ordinance [...], a received opinion’, and by extension ‘conventionally’.⁴ Thus (g)nomic poetry assigns names, apportions place and value, outlines what is acceptable and customary; it prescribes and proscribes; it encompasses popular belief and conventional understandings. Sociologists have used the word ‘nomic’ to describe the essential ‘ordering’ of thought and experience by means of a belief system.⁵ This captures well the underlying nature of the expressions and poetry that have hitherto been called gnomic: they structure reality as perceived by a society, and in turn, construct the reality the society

perceives. This is examined in more detail in relation to the Maxims poems in Chapter 7. Here, though, I will briefly illustrate the nomic character of maxims and gnomes by showing how they organise thought and experience, society and its ethics, and literature; then I will show that there are indications that the linguistic neighbours of the Anglo-Saxon understood and used them in similar ways.

ORGANISING THOUGHT AND EXPERIENCE

Language is the primary means of structuring and expressing thought. Gnomes and maxims are linguistic moulds into which observation, experience and thought can be poured in order to clarify, solidify and preserve them. Gnomes and maxims are structured forms of language which organise thought into conventional patterns. They are very widespread forms of expression in Old English, particularly in poetry, but also in prose. For the time being, I define the gnome as a linkage of a thing and a characteristic, so in Maxims II we find ‘winter byð cealdost’ (5b, winter is coldest); a maxim I define as a sententious generalisation.

In the Laws of Ine, LXXXVII (Liebermann I, p. 108),⁶ fire-raising or burning wood in someone’s forest carries a 60 shilling fine as against stealing wood by chopping which carries a 30 shilling fine for each of the first three trees, but no more, because ‘fyr bið þeof’ (fire is a thief), but ‘sio æsc bið melda’ (the axe is a tell-tale). These gnomes rather neatly reverse the notion that chopping someone else’s wood is a much worse form of theft than

burning it: fire is the real thief, and initially the more secretive, whereas chopping is a give-away, and the owner must take some responsibility for the loss. Ine needs say no more as the gnomes summarise the whole process of reasoning about wood, theft and responsibility which underlies the different penalties.

In the poetry, there are isolated examples of gnomes, for example ‘Dom bið selast’ (glory is best) in Maxims I 80, but mostly they are found in catalogues: the characteristics of a wise man in The Wanderer, or things that are transitory in that poem; the names of the runes with their effect on human beings in The Rune Poem; in Maxims II, the catalogue of superlatives and the locations of kings, fish, dragons and others; sum catalogues detailing fates or trades; the characteristics of old age in Solomon and Saturn. There is an obvious educational intention behind these, and in some cases, the forms were probably used as mnemonics to help people remember the rune names or other lore. There is an element of truism about each individual gnome: possessions are transient (Wan 108a), ice is extremely cold (Run 29a), halls have doors (Mx2 36b), age outlasts even stone (SnS 300a). But there are two kinds of structuring at work in these passages: in the gnome itself there is identification or congruity between the parts, often a typical or conventional relationship; and in the catalogue there is the organising of the gnomes into a larger pattern. The larger pattern does not have to be sequential, and in fact often has no other apparent device to signal unity than the constant of the gnome. bið, -ost, sceal on, or the present-tense verb. The significance of the

catalogue is rather that it indicates what knowledge is like—diverse but assimilable into categories. The list of gnomes orders and contains the infinite variety of phenomena.

One further example will suffice to show how the Anglo-Saxon mind turned to the gnome when there was a list to be made: St Paul's 'Unus Dominus, una fides, unum baptisma; Unus Deus et Pater omnium, qui est super omnes, et per omnia, et in omnibus nobis' (Ephesians 4. 5-6) becomes in the Homiletic Fragment II,

An is geleafa, an lifgende,
 an is fulwiht, an fæder ece,
 an is folces fruma, se þas foldan gesceop,
 duguðe ond dreamas. (8-11a)

(Faith is one, the Living God is one, baptism is one, the
 Eternal Father is one, the Creator of people is one, who made
 the earth, good things and joys.)

As with the gnomes in other catalogues, the intention here is to express the uniqueness and particularity of each item in a structure which allows almost infinite extension but which creates, and in this case explicitly states, overall unity.

The best known maxims are those in Beowulf which express the basics of the heroic code:

Selre bið æghwæm

þæt he his freond wrece þonne he fela murne.

(1384b-5)

(It is better for anyone that he avenge his friend than mourn too much.)

or:

Deað bið sella

eorla gehwylcum þonne edwitlif. (2890b-91)

(Death is better for any warrior than a life of shame.)

Comparing the two, it is apparent that vengeance is a social responsibility for anyone, whereas the high code of honour embraced by the eorl (noble man, warrior) makes death preferable to shame: this is a social distinction in the heroic code that also appears in the maxims of The Battle of Maldon, which I consider further in Chapter 5. But both maxims focus on what is the better course in typical situations, and so orders experience in ethical terms.

In Maxims I, it is humanity's first (ærest) responsibility to praise God (4a), and the king and queen's, to be generous (82b-83a). There are numerous things known only to God ('God ana wat', see Chapter 2). There are things which happen frequently (oft) or seldom (seldan), things which apply to everyone (monna gehwylc, æghwæm), to many (fela) or only a few (fea). There are things which must, should, ought to, and do happen (sceal and present tense verbs), things which are and will be (bið, is), things that can or cannot happen (mæg). All these typical gnomic features are also fundamentally nomic, arranging thought and experience into hierarchies, probabilities and patterns.

ORGANISING SOCIETY

Already in the two maxims from Beowulf we have observed a social distinction in heroic responsibilities. Heroic maxims in poetry tend to encapsulate what might be called the ‘trade rules’ of the retainer. But in Old English prose, maxims frequently encapsulate more general trade rules, which define and categorise the functions, qualities and practices of people in different social roles.

In the dialogue of Ælfric’s Colloquy, the interviewer says to the huntsman who has related how he speared a boar: ‘Swiðe dyrstig wære þu þa’ (You were very brave then!). The hunter replies, ‘Ne sceal hunta forhtmod beon’ (A huntsman must not be frightened).⁷ An extended passage in Ælfric’s second Pastoral Letter shows marked similarity with the Colloquy in giving details of the trades.⁸ The purpose here is to compare the vocation of the priest with secular trades, urging the clergy that they be as diligent in their calling as the workman is in his. In the process, Ælfric briefly sums up the characteristic tools of the trades in maxim form:

Se smiþ him begyt slecge and anfylte and tangan and bylias and
ge-hwylce tol.

Se tryw-wyrhta eac æhxe and nafegar and ealle þa tol, þe to
trywe gebyriað.

Se fiscere and se hunta fore-sceawiað him mid net.

And ealle woruld-cræftige men wyrcað hira tol.

And se eorðlingc ne erat, butan he erigan cunne.

(166-70, p. 128)

(The smith gets for himself a sledgehammer and anvil, tongs and bellows and suchlike tools. The carpenter also gets an axe, an auger and all those tools which are appropriate to carpentry. The fisherman and the huntsman provide themselves with nets, and all tradesmen acquire their own tools. And the ploughman does not plough unless he knows how.)

Then he moves on to maxims for the guidance of the priest, often expanded by apodictic cases:

Lange sceal leornian se-þe læran sceal [...]

Se mæsse-preost sceal mannum bodian þone soþan geleafan and
hym lar-spel secgan. (172, 175, p. 130)

(Those who teach must study long and hard ... The mass-priest must preach the true faith to people and deliver homilies.)

And finally in the section where maxims are used, Ælfric lists (in a manner reminiscent of The Wanderer) those things which a priest should not be or do:

Ne mot nan preost beon mangere oþþe gerefa.

Ne drincan æt wynhuse, ne druncen-georn beon.

Ne modig, ne gylpende, ne on his gyrlum ranc, ne mid golde
geglenged ac mid godum þeawum.

Ne he sacful ne beo. Ne he ceaste ne astyrige. Ac he sceal þa
sacfullan gesibbian, gif he mæg.

Ne mot he wæpnu werian ne to ge-feohte faran.

(185-89. p. 134)⁹

(No priest may be a merchant or reeve, nor may he drink at the tavern and get drunk; nor should he be headstrong or boastful, nor showy in his dress. adorned not with gold, but rather with virtues. He should not be quarrelsome, nor a stirrer-up of quarrels, but he must rather reconcile the quarrellers if he can. He may not bear weapons, nor go to battle.)

In his rather expansive style, Byrhtferth gives us a maxim for a teacher:¹⁰

Gerysenlic þas þing byð þam lareowe þæt he na forhele his hlosnere þæt riht þe he on þam cræfte can.

(I.2.232-33, p. 38)

(It is a fitting thing for a teacher that he not conceal from his pupil the truth that he knows about a science.)

Ælfric speaks of the duties and responsibilities of the teacher and the student in the preface to his Grammar:¹¹

jungum mannum gedafenað, þæt hi leornjon sumne wisdom and ðam ealdum gedafenað, þæt hi tæcon sum gerad heora junglingum, forðan ðe ðurh lare byð se geleafa gehealden.

(pp. 2-3)

(For young people it is fitting that they learn wisdom, and for the old it is fitting that they teach good sense to their children,

because the faith is maintained through teaching.)

And he finishes the preface with a plaintive appeal to the scribe to copy accurately, closing with the statement:

micel yfel deð se unwritere, gyf he nele his woh gerihtan.

(p. 3)

(The careless scribe does great wrong if he will not correct his mistakes.)

The mere circumstances of a maxim's survival testify to a kind of value in the mind of the scribe. In a tenth century Latin grammatical manuscript, Leningrad, Public Library, Lat. O. v. XVI. I, a scribe wrote among 'contemporary Latin scribbles and incomplete repetitions of the same Old English words in the blank space on 15r',

A scæl gelæred smið swa he gelicost mæg be bisne wyrcan
butan he bet cunne.¹²

(The learned smith must always follow his exemplar as closely
as possible, unless he knows better.)

There is no obvious connection between the maxim and the contents of the rest of the manuscript, and to the modern mind gelæred and smið seem incongruous; but I presume the manuscript was written for a monastic house, where it would be possible for a smith¹³ to be a monk or priest, and for this maxim to catch his eye. The characteristics of the maxim, with forceful statement followed by concession, and an association with trades or classes are clearly present. The incongruities of the maxim in this context point to the

attractiveness of the form and the importance of the ideas.

There are also maxims in the legal tract Gerefa (Liebermann I, pp. 453-55).¹⁴ which lists duties, seasonal preoccupations and other responsibilities of the reeve. And II Edmund 7 (Liebermann I, pp. 188-90) gives the responsibilities of parties in a feud:

Witan scylan fæhðe sectan: ærest æfter folcrihte slaga sceal his
forspecan on hand syllan, 7 se forspecan magum, þæt se slaga
wylle betan wið mægðe.

(Counsellors must settle feuds. First of all, according to
common law, the slayer must give to his advocate, and the
advocate to the kinsmen [of the slain], a pledge that he intends
to make reparation to the [slain person's] family.)

Again, there are clear and straightforward social categories with specific responsibilities attached to them.

From even such a small sample as this, it is clear that gnomes and maxims were traditional and conventional ways of expressing fundamental truths about life in society. The nomic function of the forms is to typify roles and specify the socially approved actions which attach to those roles. What originates in habit and custom becomes institutionalised through maxims.

CODIFYING ETHICS

The majority of maxims in poetry are broadly ethical. The form, with

its lack of personal comment, lends itself to generalising in an apparently objective fashion on ethical matters. Two of the earliest extant pieces of Old English verse are maxims, Bede's Death Song and A Proverb from Winfrid's Time:

Fore them neidfaerae naenig uuiurthit
 thoncsnotturra than him tharf sie
 to ymbhycggannae aer his hiniongae
 huaet his gastae godaes aeththa yflaes
 aefter deothdaege doemid uueorthae.

(MS. St. Gall 254)

(Before that inevitable journey [or onset] no one grows wiser in thought than he has need in order to consider before his departure what may be the judgement, good or bad, upon his soul after the day of his death.)¹⁵

Oft daedlata dome foreldit,
 sigisitha gahuaem, suuytit thi ana.

(The man slow in action generally puts off glory, puts off every victorious exploit; therefore he dies alone. Stanley, p. 122.)

The need for being prepared for death is quite prominent in Old English literature, finding a place in parallel maxims in The Seafarer 106 and Maxims I 35, where it is the stupid man who dies unprepared. This compares with Bede's insistence that the greatest wisdom is necessary to prepare for death, and incidentally, the conviction that Cuðbert and his companions had that

Bede knew when he would die, a hagiographical motif.¹⁶ And as Stanley comments on the Proverb from Winfrid's Time, 'the proverb provides a terse summary of the Germanic heroic ideal: The coward may live longer, but he will die alone' (p. 122).

The poem Resignation ends on a truly resigned note:

Giet biþ þæt [selast], þonne mon him sylf ne mæg
wyrd onwenden, þæt he þonne wel þolige.

(117-18)

(It is still the best thing that when a man cannot change the way things are, he puts up with it.)

Widsith has a maxim about the behaviour of princes:

Sceal þeodna gehwylc þeawum lifgan [...]

(11)

(Every prince ought to live virtuously.)

And the translator of the Meters of Boethius adds to his source a maxim about pride:

Ne þearf eac hæleþa nan
wenan þæs weorces, þæt he wisdom mæge
wið ofermetta æfre gemengan. (7. 6b-8)

(No hero need ever expect to be able to hold both pride and wisdom together.)

The list of ethical maxims could be extended greatly, but a final

example demonstrates the authority of the form in ethical matters. In the Metrical Psalms, the translator balked at the idea of dashing children against rocks that he found in his source, and rather urged his audience to educate:

Eadig byð se þe nimeð and eac seteð
his agen bearn on þone æþelan stan.

(P136. 9)

([Beatus qui tenebit, et allidet parvulos tuos ad petram!])

Blessed is the man who takes his own child and establishes him
on that noble rock.)

Ælfric had similar scruples about the interpretation and translation of the Old Testament, though he did not feel free to paraphrase outright.¹⁷ Here, depending on the typology, the rock could be Christ, or through a multilingual pun on Peter, petra, the Church.¹⁸ Most interesting is the fact that although it is common for the Fathers to read the verse allegorically, where the Babylonian children are sins and the Rock is Christ (I Corinthians 10. 4), it is not that interpretation that the poet uses. In the maxim, the translator's substitution seems to depend on a rough equivalence of significance, with the maxim having a similar kind of authority as Holy Writ; hence the writer could perhaps view the maxim as not departing from the spirit of scripture. He clearly felt uneasy about allying the maxim with outright barbaric behaviour: the nomic function of the maxim should only be used to reinforce desirable actions.

STRUCTURING LITERATURE

Maxims are used rhetorically and structurally particularly in poetry, but relatively little in prose. Wulfstan occasionally ends his homilies with eschatological maxims, but there are relatively few prose narratives in Old English to parallel the Icelandic saga, and those that there are, do not tend to use maxims. The ‘saga’ of Cynewulf and Cyneheard in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle is almost too breathless to use the reflective medium of maxims; and at the other end of the spectrum, the romantic story of Apollonius is too close to its source, and almost too urbane, to use them either. And while there are plenty of stories in Bede’s History and Gregory’s Dialogues, and other saints’ lives, the translators of those works seem rather to be struggling with an authoritative tradition, and a difficult language, than thinking of naturalising the structure. Just two exceptions to this pattern in Old English prose are particularly worth mentioning.

A charter (Robertson XCI, pp. 174-79),¹⁹ tells the story of a dispute between Abbot Ælfstan of St Augustine’s Canterbury and the monastic community of Christchurch over tolls from Sandwich, which Ælfstan wanted to ‘share’. When the Abbot, having been refused point blank either tolls or permission to build an alternative wharf, tries to make a shipping channel, the writer comments,

ac him ne speow nan þingc þæron. forþam he swingþ eall on
idel þe swincð ongean X es willan. 7 se alet hit eall þus.

(p. 178)

(but it was an utter failure, for he who labours against the will of Christ labours in vain. Then the abbot let the matter drop.

Robertson's translation, p. 179.)

The maxim has biblical overtones, echoing Psalm 126. 1. 'nisi Dominus ædificaverit domum, in vanum laboraverunt qui ædificant eam', and comes at the climax of the story. It is followed by a summary of the position as it remained: the community kept the tolls, and the Abbot never tried to get the third penny again. As Stenton remarked of the vernacular charters, 'the finest documents in this class have a vividness of detail which entitles them to rank as literature. As a whole, they are remarkable as pieces of free composition in English prose'.²⁰ The maxim contributes to the narrative flow by emphasising the conclusion that the community could draw from the episode: the abbot, for all his eminence, was obviously going against the will of Christ in this particular instance. No more conclusive judgement could be made.

In a rather different mode Ælfric, retelling Bede's life of King Oswald, adds a lesson of his own by means of a maxim.²¹ Writing of the miracles performed by Saint Oswald's relics, he relates the story of an Irishman of careless life who was brought low by illness. Realising he needs the intercession of a saint, the man pleads for some relic of Saint Oswald and is given scrapings from the stake on which Oswald's head had been impaled, in water to drink, and is instantly healed. The man amends his life and tells of the miracle wherever he goes. And Ælfric comments,

For-þy ne sceall nan mann awægan þæt he sylfwylles behæt

þam ælmihtigan gode . þonne he adlig bið
 þe læs þe he sylf losige . gif he alihð Gode þæt.

(269-71)

(Therefore no one should renege on what he voluntarily
 promised to Almighty God when ill, lest he lose his very self
 if he denies God that.)

Aware that he has departed somewhat from his text, Ælfric continues with one
 of Bede's own comments, originally attached to a different story (Historia
Ecclesiastica III. 13):

Nu cwæð se halga Beda þe ðas boc gedihte .
 þæt hit nan wundor nys . þæt se halga cynincg
 untrumnyse gehæle nu he on heofonum leofað .
 for ðan þe he wolde gehelpa þa þa he her on life wæs .
 þearfum and wannhalum . and him bewiste syllan .

(272-76)

(Now the holy Bede, who composed this book, says that it is
 no wonder that the saintly king heals sickness now that he lives
 in heaven, because while he was alive here he wished to help
 the poor and sick and give them succour.)

In conclusion Ælfric mentions how Cuðbert saw Aidan's soul carried to
 heaven by angels, and the removal of Oswald's bones to Gloucester. This
 rounds off the story with information from sources other than the Historia:
 Cuðbert's vision presumably from Bede's Life²² and the translation to
 Gloucester from (relatively) recent history. Thus Ælfric brings the anecdote

of the Irishman to a close with a maxim of his own, and adds Bede's more general lesson to summarise the matter of the homily.

In verse, maxims are often put in positions of significance at the beginning or end of a speech, a fitt or verse section, or poem. About ten maxims have this function in Beowulf. The wa / wel maxims of Beowulf 183b-88 occur at the end of fitt II (as numbered in the manuscript); the Danish coastguard's famous maxim, 287b-89, heads his reply to Beowulf; Beowulf's own maxim, 'Gæð a wyrd swa hio scel' (Things go as they must, 455b) ends fitt VI; a series of maxims bridges the relation of the reward given to Beowulf and his followers and the Finn Episode (1057b-62); after the brief exhortation to Hroðgar, 'Ne sorga, snotor guma' (Do not mourn, wise warrior), Beowulf's 'Selre bið æghwæm' (It is better for every man ...) maxim heads a sententious passage at the beginning of fitt XXI; Beowulf's farewell speech ends with a maxim (1838b-39); fitt XXXV ends with a maxim (2600b-601) and Wiglaf's 'deað bið sella' (death is better ...) brings to a close both his speech and fitt XXXVIII; he uses another in beginning his speech to the Geats (3077-78).

This is not a peculiarity of Beowulf. The seventh fitt of Christ and Satan closes with a maxim (362b-64), as do the first of Andreas (120b-21), and the first of Guthlac B (890b-93); the precisely parallel expressions in Christ (1079b-80) and The Phoenix (516b-17) bring to a conclusion fitts XII and IV of those poems respectively. In the dialogue between St Andrew and

Christ in Andreas, three speeches end with maxims (313b-14, 425b-26, 458-61). Fitt X of Christ begins with a maxim at line 779, as does one of the long elegiac speeches of Guðlac's servant at line 1348.

Several shorter poems begin and end with maxims. The Wanderer, for instance, starts with a maxim,

Oft him anhaga are gebideð [...] (1)

(Often the solitary man experiences mercy...)

and closes with one which echoes the keyword ar:

Wel bið þam þe him are seceð,

frofre to fæder on heofonum, þær us eal seo fæstnung

stondeð. (114b-15)

(Well it is for the one who seeks for mercy, consolation from

the Father in heaven, where for us all security remains.)

Soul and Body II begins and ends with maxims. The little poem Alms-Giving begins with a biblical maxim, and The Wife's Lament and Resignation end with maxims.

A maxim explains the allegory in The Whale, and thus provides a bridge between the image and the allegory:

Swa bið scinna þeaw,

deofla wise, þæt he drohtende

þurh dyrne meahht duguðe beswicað [...]

(31b-33)

(That is the way it is with demons, the habit of devils—by
deceitful power they lead astray those living in virtue.)

A maxim that occurs in The Dream of the Rood makes a similar bridge between the different movements of the poem. Lines 1-77 are the dream frame and vision; lines 78-94 detail the significance of the Cross in Christian worship and iconography; lines 95-121, the significance of the Christ's death on the Cross; and lines 122 to the end, the response of the Dreamer and his incorporation into the community of the blessed.²³ The last words spoken by the Cross are a maxim that rounds off the increasing generalisation of tone:

[...] ðurh ða rode sceal rice gesecan
of eorðwege æghwylc sawl,
seo þe mid wealdende wunian þenceð.

(119-21)

(... but every soul that intends to live with the Lord must seek
the kingdom from the earth by means of the Cross.)

Interesting here is the fact that the Cross generalises to such an extent that the discourse changes from an intensely first-person narration to an impersonal mode where it now refers to itself in the third person.

It is noticeable in some of the shorter poems that this desire to round off on a solid sententious note has a tendency to encourage the poet to draw out the ending; other shorter poems like The Gifts and The Fortunes of Men, Maxims I and Maxims II are made up almost entirely of maxims. But this should not obscure the fact that maxims are used emphatically and

prominently throughout the corpus of native Old English poetry. The function of the maxim in the longer poems is something like the rhymed couplet at the end of scenes in Shakespeare's blank verse plays: it frequently marks a division, and constitutes an aural signal of punctuation.²⁴

What is clear throughout these examples is that 'nomic' is a preferable epithet than 'gnomic' for the gnomes and maxims, because it relates to more than just the nature of the expressions: it also captures the essence of their functions, mental, social, ethical and rhetorical.

MAXIMS IN THE OLD GERMANIC LANGUAGES

In her recent study, A Store of Common Sense, Carolyn Larrington has given considerable attention to the Norse gnomic poems. Inevitably, with a focus on mainly the wisdom poems, she cannot do justice to the wealth of material that Old Norse literature presents us with, and in an even briefer few paragraphs, I can add little. However, I have chosen the short Eddic poem Hamðismál and the relatively short Hrafnkels Saga to illustrate what I think are fairly typical uses of the maxim in Norse.

Hamðismál²⁵

In Ursula Dronke's edition and interpretation of the poem, there are several maxims and proverbs. The first stanza Dronke believes to be a 'baroque ornament' (p. 182) added by a later writer. But she finds thematic reasons for not regarding the stanza as 'otiose and trivial' (p. 182). In

addition to these reasons, it appears that the redactor had a sense of structure, as this stanza strikes the elegiac note that balances the fatalistic note of the penultimate stanza, and generalises Guðrún's plangently expressed feelings at the unavenged loss of Svanhildr:

Ár um morgin

manna bqlva

sútir hveriar

sorg um kveykva. (st. 1)

(At early dawn every pain that can be felt for human ills
kindles grief.)

The poem allows no resolution of the grief, since revenge for Svanhildr is gained only by the loss of the brothers, and the dawn of misery is only exacerbated by the evening of the Norns' decree.

Hamðir answers his mother's incitation in anger and blames her for the whole train of events that her actions and previous incitement have already caused. His speech ends with the cutting maxim,

Svá skyldi hverr qðrom

veria til aldrлага

sverði sárbeito

at sér né stríddit. (st. 8)

(One should encompass another's death with wound-cutting
sword without hurting onself.)

He means to suggest that Guðrún's encompassing of deaths so far has been as

much to her own hurt as it has been to those she has sought revenge upon, and also that this particular project will be no different. At this stage of the narrative the irony of the maxim in that his and Sqrli's killing Erpr is to their own ultimate destruction, is not apparent. But it becomes so to Sqrli, and finally to Hamðir, later.

Erpr attempts to join the two as they set off on their journey. Hamðir and Sqrli ask dismissively what help he can give, and the poem reports his proverbial reply:

Svaraði inn sundrmœðri,
svá kvaz veita mundo
fulting frændom,
sem fótr qðrom. (st. 13)

(He answered—son of a different mother—said that he would
give help to his kinsmen as one foot to another.)

To which the brothers reply,

Hvat megi fótr
fæti veita,
né holdgróin
hond annarri? (st. 13)

(How can a foot help a foot, or a hand grown from the body's
flesh help a hand?)

The Volsunga Saga makes a great deal of this, and stresses the brothers' misunderstanding of this proverb rather than their misinterpretation of Erpr's

second maxim or proverb. Rather laboriously, the saga shows the implications by having the brothers steady themselves with hand and foot, adding to the detail of the poem which shows them later dismembering King Iqmunrekkr (cap. 44, pp. 77-78).²⁶ But Erpr's pride and his intellectual superiority is what angers the brothers and they misinterpret his reply.

Illt er blauðom hal

brautir kenna.

(st. 14)

(No good comes of showing a coward the way.)

Undoubtedly the intention of this proverb is wittily to say that if they cannot see the obvious meaning of the last proverb, having him explain it will do them no good. They choose to take the wit as an insult, and as the poem laconically says, 'cut their strength by a third'.

In the fight with Iqmunrekkr, Hamðir taunts the king as he throws his hands and feet into the fire, and the taunt stirs Iqmunrekkr to tell his men how to overcome the brothers. Sqrli reproaches his brother for the taunt, and for his impetuosity. In Dronke's text, he twice faces Hamðir with his own reproach, reinforced each time with a maxim, in two short strophes:

Bql vanntu, bróðir,

er þú þann belg leystir,

opt ór rauðom belg

bql ráð koma.

Hug hefðir þú. Hamðir.

ef þú hefðir hyggiandi:

mikils er á mann hvern vant,

er manviz er. (st. 26-27)

(You ruined us, brother, when you unloosed that bag—from a bleeding bag often bold counsels come.²⁷

You'd have had a brave heart, Hamðir, if you'd had a wise one: a man lacks much when he lacks a brain.)

Hamðir realises his mistake in relation to Erpr, seeks reconciliation with Sqrli, and finally reconciles himself to his fate with the last maxim of the poem:

Góðs hofom tírar fengit

þótt skylim nú eða í gær deyia.

Kveld lifir maðr ekki

eptir kvið norna. (st. 30)

(We have got good fame whether we die now or another day.

No man outlives the evening after the Norns' decree.)

Several brief points can be made about the use of maxims here. Firstly, they are used by the characters to emphasise and reinforce what they are saying: the maxims represent the motivations and moral judgements of the characters. Secondly, the poet uses them with a fine sense of dramatic irony, exposing flaws in the characters, particularly Hamðir, but also Erpr: this irony tests without invalidating the authority of the maxims. Thirdly, the maxims

maxims are used in a structured fashion. Each of the brothers is given two maxims or proverbs: Hamðir's two give closure to his two main speeches in response to his mother and his fate; Erpr's together, laconic and biting, sting Hamðir and Sqrli into their decisive mistake in killing him; Sqrli's together, rebuke Hamðir for his stupidity and bring him to realisation of his fault. Not only is the main part of the narrative framed by Hamðir's two maxims, but Hamðir's final maxim, with its terminal kveld, echoes the misery of the morginn in the first strophe. Thus despite the problematical state of the text, and the need for reconstruction of, particularly, Sqrli's first maxim, it is clear that poet and redactor had some sense of the overall structure of the poem and used maxims to indicate and emphasise that structure, as well as for basic narrative purposes.

Hrafnkels Saga²⁸

Some of the maxims in the saga are labelled or otherwise indicated to be sayings: '(þat er) forn orðskviðr' (it is an old maxim, twice), 'er þat satt [...]' (it is true ...), and a combination of the two, 'satt er flest þat, er fornkveðit er [...]' (it is often true, what they used to say ...). Others are not so labelled. In all, there are ten, and eight of these are given in direct speech where they serve to prompt, restrain from, or comment on, action. Half of them relate directly to Hrafnkell.

Having taken his great oath to Freyr that he will kill anyone who rides Freyfaxi, Hrafnkell gives Einarr solemn warning and reinforces the solemnity

with the proverb ‘eigi veldr sá, er varar annan’ (he is not to be blamed who gives warning, cap. 3, p. 102). By making his oath public in this way, and using the maxim to give public sanction to his entirely private decision, Hrafnkell effectively brings about the rest of the action in the saga. At the same time the hard edges of Hrafnkell’s character appear: having made the oath and given the warning he cannot be deflected from the path he has laid out for himself. He admits as much to Einarr before he kills him, and the authorial maxim which follows emphasises the inflexibility of his character:

‘Þar munda ek hafa gefit þér upp eina sök, ef ek hefða eigi svá mikit um mælt, en þó hefir þu vel við gengit.’

En við þann átrúnað, at ekki verði at þeim monnum, er heitstrengingar fella á sik, þá hljóp hann af baki til hans ok hjó hann banahogg.

(cap. 3, p. 105)

(‘I would have forgiven you a single offence if I had not said so much about it, and when you have candidly confessed.’

And with the belief that nothing [good] will come to those who draw down a curse on themselves for breaking oaths, he got off the horse, ran at him, and struck him his death blow [my emphasis].)

The main change in Hrafnkell’s character is described in cap. 7, when Hrafnkell gives up his allegiance to Freyr, and becomes a milder and more reasonable man. But it is his humiliation that starts the process, and in

Sámr's hands he makes choices: not only to live, and that not only for the sake of his sons, but also against his former way of life and the code of honour which he formerly espoused. Echoing Wiglaf's maxim, 'deað bið sella / eorla gehwylcum þonne edwitlif', (death is better than a life of shame for any noble man) and indeed a remark of Adam of Bremen in relation to the Zealanders,²⁹ Hrafnkell comments on the choice offered him by Sámr of life and deprivation of all his authority, or death:

Mörgum mundi betr þykkja skjótr dauði en slíkar
hrakningar. (cap. 5, p. 121)

(To many a quick death would seem better than such
humiliation.)

But against the judgement of the heroic maxim, and even against his earlier pleading, 'Undan hrakningum mælumk ek' (I ask to be spared humiliation, cap. 5, p. 120), Hrafnkell chooses life.

The common judgement on Hrafnkell's fate is couched in the form of the proverb 'skömm er óhófs ævi' ('the career of anything beyond the mean is short',³⁰ cap. 5, p. 122). But this is subtly undermined, as the land and the little farm that Hrafnkell buys, and which gives rise to the murmurings and rememberings of the populace, turn out to be fruitful and productive.

Finally, as in many of the sagas, the revenge is prompted by the taunts of a woman. Hrafnkell has apparently let things pass, and has become comfortable, and there is no indication that he contemplates vengeance. The

appearance of Eyvindr Bjarnason with all the trappings of youth, wealth and breeding seems to spark off Hrafnkell's serving woman:

‘Satt er flest þat, er fornkveðit er, at svá ergisk hverr sem eldisk. Verður sú lítil virðing, sem snimma leggsk á, ef maðr lætr síðan sjálf af með ósóma ok hefir eigi traust til at reka þess réttar nokkurt sinni [...]

(cap. 8, p. 126-27)

(What the old saying says is most true, that ‘the older, the more cowardly’. Honour diminishes that was early acquired, if the man later behaves shamefully and has no confidence to take the opportunity of vengeance...)

Hrafnkell immediately prepares for the battle with Eyvindr, kills him, and subsequently catches Sámr unprepared. Contradicting the serving woman's proverb, but fulfilling the maxim, Hrafnkell retains his honour: ‘Hrafnkell sat í búi sínu ok helt virðingu sinni’ (Hrafnkell lived at his farm and retained his honours, cap. 10, p. 133).

The remaining proverbs and maxims in the saga take their place in the development of the other side of the story. Bjarni refuses to help his brother Þorbjörn against Hrafnkell because he knows that he is no match for him, ‘er þatt satt, at sá er svinnr er sik kann’ (that is true, that the wise man knows himself, cap. 3, p. 106). This opens the way for the involvement of the Þjóstarssons in the case, because they are a match for Hrafnkell, and also provides proleptic comment on Sámr, who clearly fails in self-knowledge.

While a proverb is used to enable Bjarni to back out of the case, maxims are used by Þorkell both to persuade himself to support Sámur, and to draw Þorgeirr into supporting him. These are an interesting illustration of the way maxims and proverbs can be manipulated to support the individual's personal preferences. Þorkell promises to be on Sámur's side in the court, 'með því at mér þykkir ærin nauðsyn til at mæla eptir náskyldan mann' (inasmuch as it appears to me that it is entirely obligatory to take up the prosecution for [the death of] a near relative, cap. 4, p. 112). Once again there are echoes here of Beowulf's maxim, 'selre bið æghwæm / þæt he his freond wrece, þonne he fela murne' (it is better for every man that he avenge his friend than mourn too much), and the underlying obligation of the heroic society to avenge the death of kin. Þorkell works this maxim into his speech to Þorgeirr later when he explains Þorbjörn's motives to his brother: 'Er honum þetta nauðsyn, en eigi seiling, þó at hann mæli eptir son sinn [...]' (For him it is obligation not greed, that he takes up the prosecution for his son..., cap. 4, p. 114); and Þorgeirr himself disclaims responsibility initially when he says he can understand why others have refused their support to Þorbjörn and Sámur, 'Get ek af því flesta menn ófúsa til, þá sem engi nauðsyn dregr til' (I suppose that [humiliation at Hrafnkell's hands] is why most men are unwilling to be involved who have no obligation to compel them, cap. 4, p. 114).

Þorkell begins the assault on his brother's unwillingness to be involved not only by the brutal expedient of having Þorbjörn wrench Þorgeirr's foot.

but also with the apparently unassailable logic of maxims, the first followed closely by two versions of another:

En mǫrgum teksk verr en vill, ok verðr þat mǫrgum, at þó fá eigi alls gætt jafnvel, er honum er mikit í skapi [...], ok er þat at vánum, at sá maðr gæti eigi alls vel, er mikit býr í skapi. (cap. 4, p. 113-14)

(With many, things turn out worse than intended, and it happens with many a man that he cannot take care of everything as well [as he would like] when he has a lot on his mind..., and it is to be expected that a man with a lot on his mind will not take as much care of everything.)

Porkell's aim in this episode seems to be to have Þorgeirr transfer his pity from himself to Þorbjörn, by blaming his clumsiness on age, distraction and disability; and to transfer his anger from Þorbjörn to the ultimate source of the pain, the person who killed the old man's son. Then he portrays the doddering Þorbjörn as one who nevertheless takes his family obligations seriously, and it is only when Þorgeirr hears that the suit is against Hrafnkell that he objects to being involved. At this point Porkell argues that if he were the chieftain, he would very likely be just as cautious, but that in this case there is much to be gained and little to lose: 'Hefir sá ok jafnan, er hættir' (nothing venture, nothing win, cap. 4, p. 115). Even so, Þorgeirr is unwilling to take the risk until Porkell threatens to go off in a huff.

The prosecution goes ahead and Hrafnkell is outlawed. Sámr's jauntiness reasserts itself, and instead of taking the advice of the Þjóstarssons, he allows Hrafnkell to live. With this in mind, the Þjóstarssons give Sámr a piece of parting advice:

Gættu nú vel til, ok vertu varr um þik, af því at vant er
við vándum at sjá. (cap. 6, p. 123)

(Watch out now and beware for yourself, because it is
necessary to be vigilant against the wicked).

Sámr turns out to be neither vigilant enough, nor lucky enough to make the most of the position he gains from Hrafnkell.

In the saga, then, there are maxims used in many of the ways they are used in Old English poetry: maxims expressing the heroic code, maxims commenting on and evaluating character and action, maxims used for the purpose of affecting the behaviour of other characters. The nomic style with its sense of being received opinion, fits well with the 'objectivity' of the saga narrative. It is not difficult to see the art of a Christian redactor in the early part of the story: the cause of Einarr's death, and of Hrafnkell's later humiliation, is Hrafnkell's oath to Freyr, and his rigid commitment to an unchristian code of conduct (explicit in his refusal to forgive the offence). The code is simplified and distilled into the two maxims invoked by Hrafnkell, firstly as warning (he is not to be blamed ...), and secondly as an objectification of Hrafnkell's basis of belief (nothing good will come from oathbreaking). The three other maxims relating to Hrafnkell are all, in the

event, proved invalid. Hrafnkell chooses temporary humiliation rather than death, and although he is an outstanding man, his career is not short, and he does not become more cowardly with age. While the maxims used in the telling of the other part of the story are more straightforwardly used for comment or effect, this ambiguity of maxims in relation to Hrafnkell is not unlike that which has been discerned in Beowulf. There are limitations to the value and validity of heroic maxims which a Christian audience might be expected to understand and appreciate.

The main point to be made about the use of maxims in Old Norse literature, particularly the narrative literature, is that it shows a high level of sophistication in the employment of traditional sayings. The same is true of Old English heroic poetry, which I examine in more detail in Chapter 5. B. J. Whiting calculated that Grettis Saga has 57 proverbs or maxims, and shows that these are distributed between the hero (approximately half) and the rest of the characters (the other half, excluding the six used by the saga author in propria persona).³¹ This tells us very little about how they are used, but a reading of the saga shows that the maxims indicate the motivations and beliefs of the characters, they prompt action, they define roles and the behaviour appropriate to them, they occur at critical turns of the story. The author of Njáls Saga³² is perhaps more sparing in his use of the maxim, but Gunnarr's last speech to the unforgiving Hallgerðr is unforgettable, and in its way a proper epitaph: 'Hefir hverr til síns ágætis nokkut' ('everyone does something for his own glory', cap. 77, p. 189).

Another epitaph: so far as I am aware, the Norse runic inscription from Kirk Michael on the Isle of Man, (Kirk Michael III) raised apparently by a Celt, Mallymkun, in memory of his foster-mother,³³ is the only early epigraphical maxim:

[b]etra:es:laifa:fustra:kupan:pan:son:ilan+

(It is better to leave a good foster-son than a bad son.)³⁴

As in so many of the inscriptions, remembrance of the dead is only part of the function, and building the reputation of the living is another part. This inscription gives a fascinating insight into the perception that an ethnic Celt had of the role of maxims in Norse society, and it reinforces the notions that have been drawn from Eddic poetry and saga: maxims are memorable, forceful, authoritative and full of significance for those who will attend them. For the Norse, nothing is so useful as a general maxim.

OLD SAXON AND OLD HIGH GERMAN

The literature in these closely related languages is very different from that found in Norse, though fragmentary as it is, it has many similarities with Old English. The chief early monuments are the Hildebrandslied, The Old Saxon Genesis, Muspilli and the Heliand.³⁵

The Hildebrandslied is fewer than 70 lines long as it has survived, yet it has a maxim. When Hildebrand tries to give his son a ring so as to prevent the challenge fight, Hadubrand responds.

Mit geru scal man geba infahan

ort widar orte.

(37-38)

(A man should receive a gift with the spear, point to point.)

Dickins cites parallels to the action described here as heroic protocol from the Chronicon Novaliciense and Egils Saga.³⁶ What is perhaps more interesting is the way that, with a deft turn of phrase, the poet portrays Hadubrand as rather a prig, and a loquacious one at that, whose concern with the niceties will cost him his life.

The case of the Old Saxon Genesis is especially interesting for two reasons: first, as Sievers demonstrated a century ago, it forms the basis of the Old English Genesis B; and secondly, T. A. Shippey has shown that within Genesis B, the use of maxims by the translator is in some ways eccentric ('Maxims', pp. 36-39). He comments: 'Far from scrutinizing traditional sayings to see how they might be deepened [...] he showed himself unable to criticize them at all, still less to resist them!' (p. 37). In a later article, I tried to show that the Genesis B maxims are actually translations of Old Saxon expressions, not merely inapposite additions from the Old English translator.³⁷

There are many parallels between the Old English and Old Saxon poems in the maxims they use. R. L. Kellogg argued for formulaic studies to take the continental material into consideration,³⁸ and Roland Zanni has investigated a range of words and verse formulas.³⁹ In this connection it is interesting to note the following:

Fader uuēt it êno
 hêlag fan himile: elcur is it beholen allun,
 quikun endi dôdun, huan is kumi uuerðad.

(4305b-07)

(The Father alone knows, the Holy One in heaven; it is hidden
 from everyone else, living or dead—when his coming will be.)

Here the Heliand poet is dealing with the apocalyptic passage Matthew 24. 36, and does so also with maxims in Heliand 2639b-41. The phrasing is very similar to that of Old English ‘God ana wat’ series of maxims discussed in Chapter 2. Similarly, another commonplace, the wa / wel types discussed at length in Chapter 4, occur in Heliand, Old Saxon Genesis and Muspilli:

Sô is thena liudio uuê,
 the sô undar thesumu himile scal hêrron uuehslon.

(Hel 4626b-27)

(Woe to those people who change lords under heaven.)

This follows Judas’s betrayal of Christ, and comes at the end of fitt LV.⁴⁰ Another follows reference to Seth’s godly disposition:

Sô thana is manno uuel,
 thie io mið sulicaro huldi muot hêrron thionun.

(OSG 112b-13)

(Well it is with the person who with such a disposition of grace
 constantly serves his lord.)

And an antithetical pair (compare Beowulf 183b-88) occurs in Muspilli:

uue demo in uinstri scal sino uirina stuen,

prinnan in pehhe: daz ist rehto paluuic dink,
 daz der man haret ze gote enti imo hilfa ni quimit.

(Mus 25-28)

(Woe to the one who must in darkness pay for his crimes, burn
 in hellfire: that is a truly baleful thing that a man should call
 out to God, and no help comes.)

Pidiu ist demo manne so guot, denner ze demo mahale quimit,
 daz er rahono uueliha rehto arteile.

(Mus 63-65)

(Therefore it is well with the man to whom the judgement
 comes that his former deeds are judged just and right.)

At the close of fitt XLIX, the Heliand poet takes the opportunity
 offered by the story of the raising of Lazarus to generalise about how God
 saves and helps people in trouble:

Sô mag heĕenkuninges,
 thiu mikile maht godes manno gehuilikes
 ferahe giformon endi uuið fiundo nîd
 helag helpen, sô huemu sô he is huldi fargiĕid.

(4114b-17)

(Thus can the King of heaven, the mighty power of God,
 protect the life of any person, anyone to whom he grants his
 favour, and help the holy one against the malice of enemies.)

This too, is closely parallel to the Beowulf poet's maxim,

Swa mæg unfæge eaðe gedigan

wean ond wræcsið se ðe waldendes

hyldo gehealdeþ. (2291-93a)

(Thus can the undoomed one, the one who is kept by the
Lord's favour, easily survive trouble and misery.)

or indeed to one in Guthlac,

Swa dryten mæg,

ana ælmihtig, eadigra gehwone

wið earfepum eaðe gescildan. (554b-56)

(Thus the Lord, alone almighty, can easily protect each of the
blessed against miseries.)

Like Bede in his Death Song and the poets of Beowulf and the Wanderer, the poet of the Heliand is concerned to warn his audience to be ready for death and the judgement that follows:

Aftar thiu scal sorgon êr

allaro liudeo gehuilic, êr he thit liocht afgeþe,

the than êgan uuili alungan tîr,

hoh heþenrîki endi huldi godes. (2617b-20)

(Everyone of the human race should be concerned about this
before he leaves this light, everyone who wishes to obtain
eternal glory and the favour of God, the high heavenly
kingdom.)

Finally, at the start of fitt LX, the Heliand poet generalises about boasting from Peter's rash promise in the gospel story, once again in a manner

reminiscent of the Wanderer beginning at line 70,

Be thiu nis mannes bâg mikilun bitherbī,
hagustaldes hrôm. [...]

Bethiu ni scoldi hrômien man
te suîðo fan imu selbon, huand imu thar suîkid oft
uuân endi uuilleo, ef imu uualdand god,
hêr hebenkuning herte ni sterkit.

(5039-40a, 5046b-49)

(Therefore a man's boasting is not very useful, the boasting of
the serving-boy ... Therefore no-one should take too much
pride in himself as both hope and will often forsake him unless
God the Ruler, the high King of heaven strengthens his heart.)

This is something of a preoccupation of the Heliand poet, as Carroll E. Reed shows.⁴¹

This is a mere selection of the maxims found in Old Saxon poetry. I have noted some of the points of overlap with Old English poetry; Christine Fell also notes resemblances between the elegiac tone and expression of one or two Latin letters of Berhtgyð, of the Bonifatian mission in Germany, and the Old English elegies.⁴² It is difficult to know what the implications of these similarities might be in view of a fairly considerable intercourse between religious in England and on the Continent. Laistner asserts that the Old Saxon poet of the Heliand 'must [...] have been familiar with some of the Old English religious poetry of the eighth century'.⁴³ and Timmer contends that

the poems are ‘modelled upon Old English religious poetry’.⁴⁴ Neither of them quite specifies what the implications might be for Old Saxon verse. Certainly the sources of the Heliand included Bede’s gospel commentaries and Alcuin (Behaghel, p. xxvi), but the closest parallels to Old English poetry that I have found in the maxims suggest only a similarity of alliterative form and traditional expression.

Both H. M. Chadwick⁴⁵ and D. H. Green⁴⁶ point to the progressive generalisation of the heroic vocabulary for ‘man, men, people’ in Old Saxon, and even in the small sample I have given, it is clear that Old Saxon man is the most popular term used. It is an interesting fact that outside of the Maxims poems, relatively few Old English maxims use mon. Given the demands of alliterative poetry one would expect a variety of terms to be used in Old Saxon as in Old English, but the range is limited, and by the time of Otfrid, ‘we are left with three only (thegan, man and gomo)’ (Green, p. 326). This is just one area where the Old Saxon tradition is different from the Old English.

All the Heliand maxims I have quoted, except the ‘Fader uuêt it êno’ passage, are generalisations arising from a consideration of the application of the biblical material; they are not directly derived from the biblical material or from Tatian.⁴⁷ They show not only the ability of the poets freely to expand and comment on their material as the Old English poets do, but also their awareness of the rhetorical value of maxims emphatically to close a fitt

or begin one. I do not believe that this constitutes what Timmer calls 'modelling', but is rather due to a long tradition of maxim use which shows itself in Norse, Old English and Old Saxon independently.

SUMMARY

Maxims and gnomes have recognisable functions in Old English literature: they organise things and people into categories, cataloguing trade rules, listing things as diverse as skills, fates and rune names. In narrative, they are used to characterise and make explicit the motivations of the protagonists, and to make value judgements and generalisations about things that happen. Beyond this, they have a structural function, marking emphatic and climactic junctures in the story. In all this there is a considerable overlap between the extant literatures of Old Norse, Old Saxon and Old High German: throughout, these expressions are nomic, ordering, structuring and categorising, as well as gnostic, expressing what is commonly known and understood.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 1

1. The Works of Lord Macaulay Complete, ed. by his Sister Lady Trevelyan, 8 vols (London: Longmans, Green, 1879): On Machiavelli, V, p. 76.
2. T. A. Shippey, 'Maxims in Old English Narrative: Literary Art or Traditional Wisdom?', in Oral Tradition Literary Tradition: A Symposium, ed. by Hans Bekker-Nielsen et al. (Odense: Odense University Press, 1977), pp. 28-46 (p. 44, n. 23).
3. Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word, New Accents (London: Methuen, 1982; repr. Routledge, 1993), passim.
4. A Greek-English Lexicon, ed. by Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, 5th edn (London: Oxford University Press, 1861), s.v.
5. Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge (Harmondsworth: Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1966; repr. Penguin Books, 1991), p. 115.
6. Die Gesetze der Angelsachsen, 3 vols (Halle: Niemeyer, 1898-1903).
7. I have given Sweet's version of the maxim, from A Guide to Old English, ed. by Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson, 5th edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p. 184. In Ælfric's Colloquy, ed. by G. N. Garmonsway, rev. by M. J. Swanton (Exeter: University of Exeter, 1991), the maxim reads 'ne sceal hunta forhtfull wesan' (p. 25).
8. Die Hirtenbriefe Ælfrics: in altenglischer und lateinischer Fassung, ed. by Bernhard Fehr, Bibliothek der angelsächsischen Prosa, 9 (Hamburg: Henri

Grand, 1914), pp. 68-145, quoted from Cambridge Corpus Christi College.

190, Fehr's 'O' manuscript.

9. The 'D' manuscript (Cambridge Corpus Christi College, 210) in Fehr's edition rather weakens the prohibitions of the 'O' text, but in a very interesting way which makes the parallel with The Wanderer clearer:

Ne to modig, ne to gilpende, ne on his gurlum to ranc, ne mid
golde ofer-glæncged [...]. (187, p. 134)

(... should not overdo the pride, boasting, finery or adornment
...).

10. Byrhtferth's Enchiridion, ed. by Peter S. Baker and Michael Lapidge, EETS SS, 15 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995). The translation is Baker and Lapidge's.

11. Ælfrics Grammatik und Glossar, ed. by Julius Zupitza (Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1880), p. 2-3.

12. N. R. Ker, 'A Supplement to Catalogue of Manuscripts Containing Anglo-Saxon', ASE, 5 (1976), 121-31, item 415, p. 127.

13. James Bradley, 'St Joseph's Trade and Old English Smip', Leeds Studies in English, 22 (1991), 21-42, argues convincingly that smip means 'metal smith' in Old English, and that according to Anglo-Saxon tradition, St Joseph was therefore not a carpenter.

14. Kemp Malone, 'The Old English Period (To 1100)', in A Literary History of England, ed. by Albert C. Baugh (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1950), pp. 1-105, notes the use of loose verse in the laws (pp. 35-37), and some other maxims.

15. The text and translation are those of Eric Gerald Stanley, 'The Oldest English Poetry Now Extant', Poetica (Tokyo), 2 (1974), 1-24 (repr. in Eric Gerald Stanley, A Collection of Papers with Emphasis on Old English Literature, Publications of the Dictionary of Old English, 3 (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1987), pp. 115-38), p. 132.
16. 'Epistola de Obitu Bedae', in Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People, ed. by Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969; repr. 1981), pp. 582-84. All references to the Historia Ecclesiastica (HE) are from this edition.
17. Ælfric's Preface to Genesis, in The Old English Version of the Heptateuch: Ælfric's Treatise on the Old and New Testament and his Preface to Genesis, ed. by S. J. Crawford, with additions by N. R. Ker, EETS OS, 160 (London: Oxford University Press, 1922; repr. 1969), pp. 76-80.
18. See Paul Cavill, 'Two Sententious Generalisations in the Metrical Psalms of the Paris Psalter', NM, 86 (1985), 453-57.
19. Anglo-Saxon Charters, ed. by A. J. Robertson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1939).
20. The Latin Charters of the Anglo-Saxon Period (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), p. 44.
21. Ælfric's Lives of Saints: Being a Set of Sermons on Saints' Days Formerly Observed by the English Church, ed. by Walter W. Skeat, 2 vols, EETS OS, 76, 82, 94 and 114 (London: Oxford University Press, 1881-1900; repr. 1966), II, XXVI, pp. 124-43. Bede's account of King Oswald is in HE, III. 1-13.

22. Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert: A Life by an Anonymous Monk of Lindisfarne and Bede's Prose Life, ed. by Bertram Colgrave (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1940). For notes on the vision, see pp. 312-13.
23. The movements are those identified by Constance B. Hieatt, 'Dream Frame and Verbal Echo in the Dream of the Rood', NM, 72 (1971), 251-63. Carol Braun Pasternack, 'Stylistic Disjunctions in The Dream of the Rood', ASE, 13 (1984), 176-86, identifies other features in 'the tight stucture of this passage [...] which effectively close the sermon and create a transition to the dreamer's personal response to his dream' (p. 182).
24. Jackson J. Campbell, 'Ends and Meanings: Modes of Closure in Old English Poetry', Medievalia et Humanistica, New Series, 16 (1988) 1-49, notes almost in passing the role of 'gnomes or sententiae' in the endings of Old English poetry (p. 6). He also sees these as 'imitative of homiletic rhetoric' (p. 6), which, though it might apply to several of the poems, is unlikely to be true about them all, precisely because of the kind of evidence from Norse that I have offered to show that the maxim has functions in native discourse quite apart from homiletic rhetoric. M. S. Fukuchi, 'Gnomic Statements in Old English Poetry', Neophilologus, 59 (1975), 610-13, though he has a rather different understanding of what a gnome or maxim is, concludes from a study of Andreas that maxims 'have a definite sense of an ending' (p. 163). There were apparently other rhetorical markers similarly independent of homiletics: Eric Stanley, 'Notes on Old English Poetry', Leeds Studies in English, 20 (1989), 319-44 (pp. 319-27), observes the frequent occurrence of light verses in the first lines of Old English poems.

25. The text and translations are from Dronke, pp. 161-242. Williams lists most of the maxims in the poem (p. 27). Most recently, T. A. Shippey, 'Speech and the Unspoken in Hamðismál', in Prosody and Poetics in the Early Middle Ages: Essays in Honour of C. B. Hieatt, ed. by M. J. Toswell (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), pp. 180-196, has examined the proverbial elements of the poem.

26. The Saga of the Volsungs, ed. by R. G. Finch, Nelson's Icelandic Texts (London: Nelson, 1965).

27. Dronke, p. 237, discusses the proverb parallels to this and her reconstruction of the text. The similarity of the Old English Durham Proverb 6 has been noted by Arngart (The Durham Proverbs, ed. by Olof Arngart [Lund: Lunds Universitets Årsskrift, 1956; rev. edn, 'The Durham Proverbs', Speculum, 56 (1981), 288-300]). 'Oft on sotigum bylige searowa licgað', translated by Arngart (1981, p. 296) as 'Often in a sooty bag (or purse) treasures lie' depends on the Latin aurum for its otherwise unattested sense 'treasures'. It might be better to see the Latin as a bad translation of the Old English, and dispense with the 'purse' and 'treasures' ideas altogether. The sense might be much nearer to both the Hávamál 134 and the Hamðismál versions, something like 'Often there is cunning in a sooty bag', ie. in someone who sits by the fire all day, namely an old person: cf. Hávamál 134. 'opt ór skorpum belg / skilin orð koma' (often from a shrunken bag come wise words). For skarpr, 'shrunk, withered', see Hávamál, ed. by David A. H. Evans, Viking Society for Northern Research Text Series, 7 (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1986), p. 129. The point remains that

the appearance of the ‘bag’ does not affect what it contains, which is the point in Hamðismál also.

28. Text from Austfirðinga Sögur, ed. by Jón Jóhannesson, Íslenzk Fornrit, 11 (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1950), pp. 95-133.

29. ‘Viri autem [...] decollari malunt quam verberari. Alia non est ibi species poenae praeter securem vel servitutem, et tunc cum dampnatus fuerit, laetum esse gloria est’ (men prefer to be beheaded rather than flogged. Among them there is no other sort of punishment than the executioner’s axe or slavery, and when a man is condemned it is glory for him to be cheerful), Adami Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum, ed. by Georgius Heinrichus Pertz, *Scriptores Rerum Germanicarum* (Hannover: Impensis Bibliopolii Hahniani, 1846), III, 6, p. 183.

30. Peter Foote, ‘Skömm er Óhófs Ævi: On Glaucia, Hrafnkell and Others’, in Idee, Gestalt, Geschichte: Festschrift Klaus von See, ed. by Gerd Wolfgang Weber (Odense: Odense University Press, 1988), pp. 285-98 (p. 291). I am grateful to Judith Jesch for directing me to this article.

31. ‘The Origin of the Proverb’, Harvard Studies and Notes in Philology and Literature 13 (1931), 47-80, (pp. 54-55).

32. Ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Íslenzk Fornrit, 12 (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1954).

33. See Judith Jesch, Women in the Viking Age (Woodbridge: Brewer, 1991), p. 74, for this interpretation, and see also next footnote.

34. R. I. Page, ‘The Manx Rune Stones’, in The Viking Age in the Isle of Man: Select Papers from the Ninth Viking Congress, Isle of Man, 4-14 July 1981, ed. by Christine Fell et al. (London: Viking Society for Northern

Research, 1983), pp. 133-39 (pp. 137-38). Page dates the inscription to the Viking Age. James E. Knirk, 'Runes from Trondheim and a Stanza by Egill Skalla-Grímsson', in Studien zum Altgermanischen: Festschrift für Heinrich Beck, ed. by Heiko Uecker, Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde, 11 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1994), pp. 411-20, notes the existence of a maxim on a Trondheim rune-stick, normalized by Knirk as 'Sá skyli rúnar rísta, / er ráða(?) vel kunni; / þat verðr mörgum manni, / at [...]' and translated by him 'he should carve runes who can understand(?) them well; it happens to many a man that ...(?)' (p. 416). The find is dated to 1175-1225, and Knirk concludes that it confirms the non-authenticity of the parallel maxim in Egils Saga, ed. by Sigurður Nordal, Íslenzk Fornrit, 2 (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1933), cap. 72, p. 230. I am grateful to Judith Jesch for this reference.

35. The texts are: The Old Saxon Genesis and Heliand from Heliand und Genesis, ed. by Otto Behaghel, 6th edn (Halle: Niemeyer, 1948); Hildebrandslied and Muspilli from Althochdeutsches Lesebuch, ed. by Wilhelm Braune and Ernst A. Ebbinghaus, 16th edn (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1979), pp. 84-86 and 86-89 respectively.

36. Runic and Heroic Poems of the Old Teutonic Peoples, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1915), p. 82, note.

37. Paul Cavill, 'Notes on Maxims in Old English', NQ, 231 (1986), 145-48.

38. 'The South Germanic Oral Tradition', in Medieval and Linguistic Studies in Honour of Francis Peabody Magoun, Jr., ed. by Jess B. Bessinger Jr. and Robert P. Creed (London: Allen and Unwin, 1965), pp. 66-74.

39. Heliand, Genesis und das Altenglische: Die altsächsische Stabreimdichtung im Spannungsfeld zwischen germanischer Oraltradition und altenglischer Bibelepik (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1980).
40. The Heliand: The Saxon Gospel, trans. by G. Ronald Murphy, S. J. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), comments on this 'This is obviously a strong warning to the Saxons, by characterizing vacillation between religions as a betrayal of one's loyalty to the Chieftain' (p. 152, note).
41. 'Gnomic Verse in the Old Saxon Heliand', Philological Quarterly, 30 (1951), 403-10.
42. 'Some Implications of the Boniface Correspondence', in New Readings on Women in Old English Literature, ed. by Helen Damico and Alexandra Hennessey Olsen (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 29-43 (p. 40).
43. Thought and Letters in Western Europe: A.D. 500 to 900, rev. edn (London: Methuen, 1931), p. 315.
44. The Later Genesis: Edited from MS. Junius 11 (Oxford: The Scrivener Press, 1948), p. 44.
45. Studies on Anglo-Saxon Institutions (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1905), p. 383.
46. The Carolingian Lord: Semantic Studies on Four Old High German Words: Balder, Frô, Truhtin, Hêrro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965).
47. Juw fon Werigha, Heliand and Diatessaron, *Studia Germanica*, 5 (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1965), gives a complete tabulation of Tatianic readings, pp. 133-34).

CHAPTER 2

DEFINITIONS

So far, I have suggested that maxims and gnomes are traditional forms of expression used for particularly nomic purposes in Old English and other Old Germanic literatures. Many writers have come to the same conclusion, and have attempted some kind of description of the forms. In this chapter, I will briefly review proposed descriptions and definitions of the forms before proposing my own.

TOWARDS A DEFINITION

Blanche Colton Williams wrote in 1914: ‘we may say, in general, a gnome is a sententious saying; in particular, it may be proverbial, figurative, moral’ (p. 3). Later she goes on to say that in her study,

the word ‘gnomic’ is synonymous with ‘sententious’. [...]

The adjective is applied to a generalization of any nature whatsoever. Such generalization may or may not be proverbial; it may express a physical truth, announce a moral law, or uphold an ethical ideal. The language may be literal or figurative. (p. 8)

While most Old English gnomes and maxims are sententious, that sententiousness tends to be a very obvious surface feature and few if any are figurative as far as we can tell. J. W. Rankin, in his review of Williams, objected to the notion of ‘sententious generalization’ as a definition with the

remark that phrases like ‘Forst sceal freosan’ (frost freezes) are sententious ‘only on the assumption that much more is meant than meets the ear’.¹ This idea of sententiousness, that it is by definition not a surface feature, and must therefore reside in figurative or other ‘deeper’ interpretations, simply does not match the Anglo-Saxon corpus, though it has given rise to a variety of interpretations of the Maxims poems (below, Chapter 7). I attempt to make some finer distinctions between maxim and proverb in the next chapter, but here it is sufficient to note that the figurative aspect of proverbs seems to be a late development, principally in Old English prose, and it is doubtful that maxims are in this sense proverbial. But the category of ‘sententious generalisation’ is a useful one which I intend to adopt.

Like Williams, H. M. and N. K. Chadwick, in defining gnomes and maxims, started from Aristotle:

a gnome is a statement not relating to particulars [...] but to universals; yet not to all universals indiscriminately, as e.g. that straight is the opposite of crooked, but to all such as are the objects of (human) action and are to be chosen or avoided in our doings. (p. 377)²

They go on to observe that ‘the word [gnome] is commonly applied, for example, to Anglo-Saxon sayings of a kind which are expressly excluded by Aristotle’s definition’ (p. 377). and this enables them to distinguish two

which are characterised by verbs in the imperative (p. 382).

The Type I is gnome is concerned with human action: it has to do with morals, advisability, and physical and magical actions (p. 377). Type II: relates to the properties or characteristics not only of mankind in general and of various classes of mankind, but also of other beings, objects, natural phenomena, etc. The gnomes of this type may in general be regarded as the results of observation, and are not capable of being converted into precepts. Under this type it will be convenient to distinguish gnomes relating to (a) human activities or experience in which no choice or judgment is involved, (b) the operations of Fate (death) and the gods, (c) all other gnomes belonging to this type—the characteristics of beings, etc. other than human. Our reason for treating (b) as a distinct variety is that gnomes of this kind sometimes occur where other varieties are wholly or almost wholly unknown. (pp. 377-78)

They summarise their definition by observing, 'Type I may be regarded as the beginning of ethical literature, and Type II as the beginning of scientific literature in general' (p. 378).

In the course of their discussion, the Chadwicks make some useful observations about the use of verbs:

As regards form—both the present indicative (especially

bið) and sceal with the infinitive are very common in gnomes of Type II. After sceal the infinitive is very frequently omitted. In gnomes of Type I sceal is almost universal.

(p. 382)

Broadly, the Chadwick Type I gnomes are what I will call ‘maxims’, and the Type II forms are what I will call ‘gnomes’, and the definition is helpful in calling attention to one of the observable distinctions in the Old English corpus. But as the Chadwicks themselves acknowledge (p. 378), there are problems with the categorisation, namely that of overlapping and indistinct categories. Is Wiglaf’s ‘Deað bið sella / eorla gehwylcum, þonne edwitlif’ (death is better for every warrior than a life of shame) an ethical and moral statement about human action (Type I), or is it an observation about death and glory or life and shame (Type II)? Maxims are rarely abstract, and generalisations about the nature of God or death seldom appear without implying an appropriate human, ethical response. On the other hand, gnomes, as I define them (below), are perhaps more abstract, though they imply an interested observer who has a particular moral, social or religious point of view. Further, one of the reasons for seeing gnomes and maxims as part of the same continuum is that the ethical type of maxim is presented as an objective fact, a simple observation, in the same kind of fashion as the gnomes. The particular distinction made by the Chadwicks between the advisable and the observable is one which was not perhaps so important to the Anglo-Saxons as to those concerned with definitions.

More recently, Elaine Tuttle Hansen has given an exhaustive descriptive account of the maxim as it features in Beowulf.³ Hansen's paragraph is worth quoting in full:

It has long been recognised that many of the two dozen or so gnomic sayings in Beowulf come from a traditional Old English gnome-hoard with numerous analogues in Old English, Old Norse, Old Welsh and Old Irish, and all of the gnomic passages are readily identifiable by those formal and thematic characteristics which, in accord with what we know from other extant works, conventionally signal the gnomic mode. Formally the sayings in Beowulf depend on a conventional gnomic vocabulary and syntax: the specialized use of the verb forms sceal, bið and mæg, organizing experience into what is and what ought to be; the adjectives gedefe and gemet, designating what is proper or fitting, and the comparative selre and the superlative selast, pointing out what is better or best; adverbs of generalization and frequency, such as a, oft, oftost and hwær; and the se þe or se þām construction, used to invoke the unspecified and representative individual. Thematically the gnomic sayings in Beowulf share proverbial and sententious concerns found repeatedly in gnomic matter in Old English and elsewhere, including the celebration of heroic virtues such as generosity, courage and loyalty; the condemnation of cowardice, indiscretion and treachery; and the

acknowledgement of the power of God or fate, on the one hand, and of the limits of human knowledge on the other.

Underlying the gnomic world view in Beowulf, as in all wisdom literatures, is a bipolar view of the moral universe: experience offers us wel and wa (183b-8), leof and laþ (1061a), god opþe yfel (Precepts 45b); consequently the ability to distinguish wisely in words and to act on the perception of differences is imperative. (p. 55)

Of course this description is impressionistic and deals with the typical rather than the essential, but some maxims have none of the linguistic characteristics listed, yet are nevertheless sententious generalisations. For all its length, Bede's Death Song manages to be a maxim without any of the items of 'conventional gnomic vocabulary and syntax' listed by Hansen, though it does reflect, or at least imply, both the bipolar view of the moral universe and the limitations of human knowledge.

More recently still, Carolyn Larrington has discussed the gnome, proverb, precept, maxim and others in relation to dictionary definitions (pp. 1-13). The limitations of such an approach are evident from the fact that Larrington concludes:

'Gnome' and 'maxim' are more-or-less interchangeable in meaning. [...] 'Aphorism' and 'apophthegm' are not distinguished from 'maxim' in usage. [...] 'Sententia' [...] is defined as a 'thought or reflection' by the OED; it is usually

employed in literary discussion interchangeably with ‘gnome’
and ‘maxim’. (p. 5)

‘Proverb’ is a distinct form, ‘but how is "common currency" proved in [...] Old English?’ asks Larrington (p. 4). ‘Precepts’ are definable as ‘admonitions relating to human conduct [...] typically expressed in the imperative’ (p. 5), as has been observed many times before. And Larrington adds that ‘gnome’ is ‘characteristically though not exclusively used to denote observations about the natural world’ (p. 5). Thus, in terms of definitions relating to actual usage of the forms in Old English, we are very little further forward.

VERBS IN THE GNOME AND MAXIM

Larrington’s discussion of ‘the sceal / bið problem’ (pp. 6-9) focuses on one of the more contentious areas of discussion. The verbs are characteristic of the gnomic mode, and the ‘problem’ seems to be to locate their precise meaning. After a brief discussion, Larrington concludes,

Bið is invariably used where the subject of the gnome is God: ‘God ūs ēce bið’ (God is eternal for us) (Exeter Maxims 8b). Possibly the overtones of obligation which sceal carries are inappropriate to a human comment on the Divine. Bið with the implication ‘is essentially’ tends to be found where natural processes are involved, as in the Cotton Maxims series (5b ff.) but there is no consistency of usage even in this context.

Sceal and bið then tend to be distributed according to

context; human activity will usually be expressed by sceal, while bið is more likely to be found in relation to God or the natural world. (p. 8)

Just two examples from the poems she refers to will show that the positive statement is wrong, and make necessary some more adequate, and less definite, account of how the verbs function. In the Exeter Maxims I:

An sceal inbindan

forstes fetre, felameahtig god. (74b-75)

(Almighty God alone has the power to unlock the fetter of frost),

and in the Cotton Maxims II:

God sceal on heofenum

dæda demend. (35b-36a)

(God, the judge of actions, lives in the heavens).

Plainly in the first quotation, sceal has more than ‘overtones of obligation’: God must do it because only he can. And equally plainly in the second quotation, sceal has no such overtones: God just happens to live in the heavens for reasons which are as obvious or obscure as those which explain why the dragon lives in a burial mound. The essential distinction between bið and sceal is that bið relates to being, whether present or future, and sceal relates to doing, whether by choice, nature, habit, necessity or obligation, present or future. Consequently bið is more frequently used in gnomes, and sceal in maxims; but as the Maxims II quotation shows, there is no absolute division between them. As Nicholas Howe concludes from a study of Maxims II:

To insist upon an invariable sense for sceal deprives the poem of its interest and its value. Although these maxims do employ a regular syntax, this frame allows for significant variation in meaning. And it might be argued that in this fact lies the true wisdom of the poem: through its syntactic regularity it teaches one to draw significant parallels, but in its use of the gnomic verbs, it also warns that parallelism does not inherently reflect correspondence. It is a lesson in difference as much as it is a lesson in similarity. (p. 164)⁴

While discussion of these distinctively gnomic verbs is useful, it disguises two facts: firstly, almost any verb can be used in a maxim, and it is the tense that is significant; secondly, the verbs are set in contexts which indicate degrees of relevance from the almost total (a, æghwylc, and so on), to the narrowly restricted (in gnomes, dragons or God; in maxims, the wise, or the eorl, for example). This second fact means that the maxim or gnome can remain true even where the proposed or ideal action does not take place. The form is stylistically adapted to cope with aberrations, incongruities and singularities. The use of quantity adjectives (e.g. fela) and frequency adverbs (e.g. oft) characteristic of maxims, make them function as probability statements, and the essential nature of probability statements is that they can ‘never be strictly contradicted by experience’,⁵ and thus they retain their validity as rules of thumb. On the other hand, when statements are more direct, when Wiglaf says ‘deað bið sella / eorla gehwylcum þonne edwitlif’.

(death is better for every warrior than a life of shame) for example, we do not have to find a meaning for the gnomic verb which will accommodate the fact that Beowulf's select band apart from Wiglaf has just run away at the prospect of death (say, 'is normally' or 'ought to be'); rather there is a clear implication that the status of those men as eorlas, is in question. A value judgement is made on those who appear to be one thing but act differently. Since death is better for every noble warrior, and these men have run away, they can hardly be truly noble or proper warriors.⁶

In gnomes, if the thing does not follow the characteristic pattern, it raises similar problems of definition: if a dragon does not live in a mound, old and proud of its treasures, you can hardly be sure it is a dragon. All the same, that does not exhaust either its being or its habits. In this latter case sceal has no necessary connotations of 'ought always', 'ought' and 'is appropriately' (Larrington, p. 7), since the Anglo-Saxons knew that dragons flew around. The gnome is as much about draconitas as anything: it is a loose association of ideas relating to a given subject. Similarly, it would be pressing the sense of sceal to see particular obligation in the list of fates described in The Fortunes of Men. To attempt to generalise about the meaning of the verbs here is both to mistake the form and to ignore the context. More precise gnomes and maxims are easily generated by using other present-tense verbs and adverbs of frequency such as a and næfre (though even these, it seems to me, are at the extremes of a probability scale rather than being intended as absolutes). The fact that sceal and bið are

normally unstressed in the verse, whereas the adverbs of frequency, and other present-tense verbs (for example, purfan, witan, and indeed *magan) not infrequently carry stress, underlines this point. Sceal and bið are intended to be susceptible to a wide range of interpretation, hard to pin down, even deliberately ambiguous, precisely because experience suggests that generalisations about nature and habits so often come unstuck. I do not mean to deny that sceal can convey a sense of obligation or necessity: plainly it can ('Ure æghwylc sceal ende gebidan', each of us has to experience the end of life, Bwf 1386); nor that these gnomic verbs are so characteristic of the form that they practically define it; but that they are what Marie Nelson calls 'the center of the gnomic sentence' ("Is" and "Ought", p. 120),⁷ even in Maxims I, I doubt, because their meaning depends so entirely on the other elements.

Marie Nelson writes of the problems experienced in translating sceal and biþ:

For one thing, sceal must sometimes be translated 'shall be,' which leaves unanswered the question of whether futurity or necessity is implied. For another, one sceal may state the obvious, while another sceal asserts an obligation. Furthermore, both biþ and sceal perform certain descriptive functions, and each verb also performs an evaluative function. Finally, sceal alone carries the full weight of moral obligation.

("Is" and "Ought", p. 110)

If Nelson were writing about maxims instead of verbs, there would be little

to disagree with in this paragraph. As it stands, it reveals the potential for ambiguity in both maxims and the verbs used in them, but makes unnecessary distinctions. In terms of ambiguity, there are perhaps three principal axes on which the verbs in maxims can be located:

present—future. This ambiguity is inherent in the Old English verb system, not just sceal. The present-tense verb can usually mean something between does and will do, is and will be. It is surely part of the point of the maxims ‘wa bið [...]’ and ‘wel bið [...]’ (woe to ... it is well with) as used by the Beowulf poet (183b-88) and others, that we cannot say for certain whether the beatitude or woe is a present or future condition, or both.

condition-obligation. This is the axis which represents the is and ought to, does and should / must do ambiguity. Poets sometimes intensify the moral obligation factor by using subjunctive forms and frequency adverbs or generality adjectives, ‘a scyle [...]’, ‘scyle monna gehwylc [...]’ (must always ..., every person should ...) because of this ambiguity. Death is a condition, a necessity, an obligation indeed in one sense, of human existence, ‘Ure æghwylc sceal ende gebidan / worolde lifes’ (Each of us has to experience the end of life in the world, Bwf 1386-87a, where ure functions as a generalising

pronoun rather than a specifying one); whereas faithfulness is an obligation, a necessity, for personal relationships in a different, moral, sense, represented by the same verb, ‘Wif sceal wiþ wer wære gehealdan’ (A woman must keep faith with her man, Mx1 100).

generality-particularity. Verbs in maxims can both generalise and particularise, often at the same time. If it is characteristic of a certain class of entities that they behave in a certain fashion, then all entities in that class customarily behave like that, or they do not fit into the class. At the other end of this axis, and using the same verbs in Old English, it is possible to say that only a given class of entities will behave in the specified fashion. Failure to observe this ambiguity in the verbs leads to absurdity. Nelson (“Is” and “Ought”, p. 111) takes Greenfield and Evert’s translation of sceal⁸ further than they perhaps intended by translating ‘seo sceal in eagan’ (Mx1 122a) as ‘sight is typically in the eye’: this expression must be placed somewhere near the opposite end of the axis, because sight (or perhaps more accurately, the pupil) is particular to the eye not typical of it. But in a similar way, the range of generality to particularity (and the other ranges of meaning detailed above) is found in the sceal on catalogue in Maxims II, discussed by Greenfield and Evert, but translated each time

‘(is) typically’ (p. 347 f.).

Later, I will discuss an approach to maxims which discerns affective and evaluative functions in them. But here I must disagree with Nelson’s argument (‘"Is" and "Ought"’, pp. 112-13) that ‘bið performs an evaluative function’. I can discover no essential difference between the verb in ‘þæt is rice god’ (that is the powerful God, Mx1 133b), ‘þæt is meotud sylfa’ (that is the Creator himself, Mx1 137b) and ‘ofost is selost / selest’ (haste is best, And 1565b, Bwf 256b). Once again, it is not the verb form, but the maxim or gnome itself, which ‘in expressing an evaluative judgment (which in this case [ie. the two expressions from Mx1] takes the form of a respectful verbalization of what everyone knows to be true) biþ functions in the performance of an obligation’. The parallel with ‘þæt wæs god cyning’ (that was a good king) in Beowulf, suggested by Nelson (‘"Is" and "Ought"’, p. 112) is a good one, and the expressions from the Maxims are possibly calqued; but the evaluative judgement is a function of the gnome as a whole, and also the metrical and syntactic form, the ‘parenthetic exclamation’ as it has been called,⁹ and not the verb alone.

This discussion leaves translation of the verbs sceal and bið in maxims more ambiguous than many scholars feel comfortable with, because no rigid consistency of translation is possible. Even in the same sentence, the same verb can imply different things; indeed there is constant interaction between observation and obligation, as Nelson and others have noted. But it seems to

me that it is characteristic of maxims that there is space for ambiguity, sophistry and casuistry, as well as definiteness, dogmatism and certainty. In Beowulf, maxims are undoubtedly expressed in ‘the authenticating voice’¹⁰, but just as certainly, there is ‘gnomic indirection’.¹¹ There is no necessary contradiction between these: they are different ways of viewing the same things, different ways of relating the maxims to their context.

A WORKING DEFINITION

Some of the limitations of a descriptive definition of gnome and maxim have already been noted: overlapping categories and impressionistic views. Definitions that represent the categories as they appear in Old English literature, and which are economical and reasonably comprehensive seem still to be lacking. I have already suggested that ‘sententious generalisation’ is a basic description of the maxim, and that ‘linking of a thing with a defining characteristic’ is a basic description of a gnome. The gnome or maxim must have the elements of a complete sentence, whether embedded in a longer one or not; if it uses comparatives or superlatives, the basis of comparison may not always be explicit (‘Dom biþ selast’ [Glory is best, Mx1 80b]). To these I would like to add prescriptive limits:

- 1. The gnomic verb, the main modal or lexical verb in the expression, must be in the present tense.**
- 2. The subject of the gnomic verb can be God or fate or the devil or a natural phenomenon or a class of human beings, but not a specified individual person.**

3. There must be no deictic reference to specify the particular situation.

The thrust of these prescriptive limits is that the expression must be generally true, viewed from the Anglo-Saxon perspective; that the statements may specify various agents, including the relatively abstract ‘death’, ‘fate’ and so on, but the working of such agents must apply generally within the categories specified by the poet; and that the expression must be a generalisation, not attached to one situation. Strictly applied, these criteria would mean that one or two expressions which in every other way would pass as maxims would need to be described as ‘applied maxims’. So for example, the two maxims in Byrhtwold’s speech in The Battle of Maldon are ‘applied maxims’ because of their deictic reference:

Hige sceal þe heardra, heort þe cenre,
 mod sceal þe mare, þe ure mægen lytlað.
 Her lið ure ealdor eall forheawen,
 god on greote. A mæg gnornian
 se þe nu fram þis wigplegan wendan þenceð.

(312-16)

(Resolve must be so much the firmer, heart so much the bolder, courage so much the greater, in proportion as our strength diminishes. Our lord lies dead here, the good man in the dirt. The man who now intends to turn away from this battle-play will always have reason to regret it.)

The applied maxims here contain the deictics ure, nu and þis. In Chapter 5 below I discuss the implications of this, because it seems to me that the poet was quite deliberately specifying the application of maxims to the particular battle, at a particular time, for good reasons. Similarly, some of the wa / wel types of maxim discussed in Chapter 4 add the time adjunct þonne to specify the eschatological future, and these too, must be considered applied maxims.

These features I have outlined for the maxim, together with the ‘conventional gnomic vocabulary’ discussed by Hansen, constitute what might be called ‘recognition signals’. They are stylistic features which mark the form and give it the conventional functions which were discussed in the first chapter. There may have been suprasegmental means for a poet or reader to indicate further that what was being said was a maxim, and to be taken especially seriously, but we cannot know this. The form in its syntax and style presents itself as what Michael Polanyi calls ‘a fiduciary act’, a statement of belief (p. 28). The briefer the form the more memorable, but in itself it claims axiomatic status.

THE MAXIM AND THE FORMULA

Although the Maxims poems display certain metrical peculiarities,¹² they, and verse maxims more generally, share the common characteristics of Old English poetry: the alliterative line, formulaic patterns of language, and variation. Variation, in particular, is a feature that does not accord well with proverbs, but is one that maxims frequently have, and this means that from

a gnomic core, the maxim can grow to diffuse lengths. Again, the briefer the maxim the more memorable, and it is observable that maxims in Beowulf contain less variation than maxims in other poems. Cynewulf begins the last fitt of his poem Christ with gnomic emphasis:

Ne þearf him ondrædan deofla strælas
 ænig on eorðan ælda cynnes,
 gromra garfare, gif hine god scildeþ,
 duguða dryhten. (779-82b)

(No-one on earth of humankind need fear the arrows of devils,
 the attacks of the hostile, if God, the Lord of Hosts, protects
 him.)

Here each of the main actors in the psychomachia is amplified by variation in some way: humans, devilish attacks, and God. Nothing is lost in the variation, and indeed much is gained: there is stress on the applicability of the maxim to all; the hostility suffered may be devilish or from other sources; and it is good for the potentially fearful to know that God is not only God, but also Lord of legions, God of hosts. It is a procedure that draws on the formulaic resources of the Old English tradition. The phrases ælda cynnes and duguða dryhten can be found respectively in Guthlac 755b (where 755a is 'ænig ofer eorðan'), 821b, Phoenix 546b and in Elene 81a, Phoenix 494a. Many other examples which use a variant term in the respective formula systems can be found for these half-lines. It is clear, then, that the maxim readily adapts itself to the style of Old English verse, but the formulaic style does not in this case define it.

There are, however, cases where a defining feature of the maxim can be discerned to be formulaic.¹³ Until relatively recently, the formulaic nature of Old English verse, the defining of formulas and formula systems, and the extension of formulaic studies to ‘composition by theme’ was much under discussion, as was the oral and / or literate nature of poetic production. In 1985, Anita Riedinger developed a new and productive approach to the formula, by defining what she calls ‘sets’, and analysing the thematic function of such sets in the poems.¹⁴ Her ideas relate very closely to some recurring formulas in maxims: these formulas, usually occurring at the beginning of a maxim, can be seen to generate expectations as to what will follow, and the formulas in some sense define the maxim. While Riedinger’s definitions are complex, her work brings a degree of clarity and rigour to Old English formulaic analysis, and adds a subtle appreciation of the thematic role of formulas in the verse. Here, I will apply the ideas briefly to the ‘God ana wat’ (God alone knows) maxims, which are:

a. God ana wat

hu he þæt scyldige werud forscrifen hefde!

(XSt 32b-33)

(God alone knows how he condemned that guilty band.)

b. God ana wat

cynig ælmihtig, hu his gecynde bið,

bb. wifhades þe weres; þæt ne wat ænig

monna cynnes, butan meotod ana,

hu þa wisan sind wundorlice,

fæger fyrngesceap, ymb þæs fugles gebyrd.

(Phx 355b-60)

(God, the almighty King, alone knows its gender, whether it be male or female. No-one of all humankind knows, but only the Creator, what the miraculous circumstances, the wonderful dispensation of old, may be concerning the birth of the bird.)

c. God ana wat

hwæt him weaxendum winter bringað!

(FtM 8b-9)

(God alone knows what the years will bring to the growing child.)

d. Meotud ana wat

hwær se cwealm cymeþ, þe heonan of cypþe
gewiteþ. (Mx1 29b-30)

(The Creator alone knows where the plague goes when it leaves our land.)

e. god ana wat

hwa þære wælstowe wealdan mote.

(Mld 94b-95)

(God alone knows who will control the battlefield.)

f. Meotud ana wat

hwyder seo sawul sceal syððan hweorfan,
and ealle þa gastas þe for gode hweorfað
æfter deaðdæge, domes bidað

on fæder fæðme. Is seo forðgesceaft
 ff. digol and dyrne; drihten ana wat,
 nergende fæder. (Mx2 57b-63a)

(The Creator alone knows where the soul will go afterwards,
 and all the spirits who go before God after the day of death to
 await judgement in the bosom of the Father. The future is
 hidden and secret; the Lord alone knows these things, the
 saving Father.)

Comparing these passages, it is clear that the determinative formula regularly occurs in the second half-line of verse. But the maxims have more in common than a formulaic style, distinctive though that is. Four of the maxims consist of a line-and-a-half; the other two, longer, examples remind the audience of the maxim form. In the Maxims this is done by reiterating the formula with a variant for God; in the Phoenix example the form is foregrounded by paraphrase ('þæt ne wat ænig / monna cynnes', no human being knows it) and repetition of the keyword ana. This shows a strong sense of the maxim as a traditional expression with a discernible shape and relatively fixed components.

These maxims form part of what Riedinger calls a 'set'. Her definition of a 'set' is: 'a group of verses usually sharing the same function and system in which one word, usually stressed, is constant, and at least one stressed word may be varied, usually synonymously, to suit the alliterative and / or

narrative context' (p. 306). Here the system is x ana x with the constant ana: the formula is x ana (witan); the synonymous terms, God / Meotud / Drihten; and the function is to signify 'knowledge limited only to one person'; and the theme of the 'set' is God's exclusive knowledge of why, when and how death will come, and what will happen afterwards.

Not all examples of the 'x ana wat' formula are maxims. Two variants shed light on how Riedinger's definition of a set, and my prescriptive limits for the maxim significantly coincide.

Ic ana wat ea rinnende

þær þa nygon nædran nean behealdað.

(MCh2 59-60)

(I alone know the flowing river where the nine serpents keep
close guard.)

and

Þu þæt ana wast,

mihtig dryhten, hu me modor gebær

in scame and in sceldum. (P50 61b-63a)

(You alone know, mighty Lord, how my mother bore me in
disgrace and guilt.)

The charm is unique in two ways: it uses the formula in the first half-line, and it does not have God as the subject of the sentence. It claims occult knowledge for the reciter, and by extension, power; whereas the maxim set emphasises God's knowledge and the limitations of human power. The

Metrical Psalm, rendering the Latin text ‘Ecce enim in iniquitatibus conceptus sum, et in peccatis concepit me mater mea’ (Psalm 50. 7), uses the formula in an entirely different way. There is no notion of knowledge in the Latin, and the rather literal-minded poet is perhaps struggling to cast a veil of spiritual respectability over the implied slur on the psalmist’s mother, making it a mystery which only God can understand. This is much closer than the charm to the theme of the set as I have expressed it, and with the example from The Phoenix, may indicate a secondary theme such as God’s exclusive knowledge of the mysteries of birth as well as death. But for the phoenix, birth and death are closely related, and the Old English poet skilfully adapts his source to exploit this paradox.

Lactantius, the main source for the poet, uses the indeterminate gender of the bird as the text for a homily denigrating sexual relations:

O fortunatae sortis felixque volucrum,

Cui de se nasci praestitit ipse deus.

Femina seu sexu seu masculus est seu neutrum:

Felix que Veneris foedera nulla colit.

Mors ille Venus est, sola est in morte voluptas:

Vt possit nasci, appetit ante mori. (161-66)¹⁵

(To this most happy and fortunate of birds, God has granted the power of being self-born. Whether female, male or neuter sexually, she is happy because she has nothing to do with Venus and her unions: her Venus is death; her only pleasure is

in death.)¹⁶

The Phoenix poet is intrigued rather by the philosophical problem of the bird's origins. But building on the god ana wat maxim formula, he picks up Lactantius' allegorical point about death leading to fuller life, by making a subliminal reference to the Day of Judgement:

De die illa et hora nemo scit (þæt ne wat ænig [...]), neque
angeli caelorum, nisi solus pater (butan meotod ana).

(Matthew 24. 36)

In The Battle of Maldon, the maxim serves to emphasise Byrhtnoð's piety as he takes the step of faith which throws the outcome of the battle into doubt. The collocation of wælstowe and wealdan is just as traditional as the god ana wat formula, occurring twice in Beowulf, and being a common circumlocution for victory in The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. Yet in all its uses, there is a grimness about the phrase which recognises the cost of any victory in terms of men killed. The Maldon poet draws on this grimness to emphasise the potential cost of Byrhtnoð's decision, to the hero himself as much as anyone. Then with hammering alliteration on w, and repetition of wæl, he pictures the bloodthirsty vikings hurrying across the causeway to take advantage. The theme of death is further, if indirectly, elaborated by the use of the verb murnan to convey the vikings' disregard of the water:

God ana wat

hwa þære wælstowe wealdan mote.

Wodon þa wælwulfas (for wætere ne murnon)

wicinga werod, west ofer Pantan,
 ofer scir wæter scydas wegon,
 lidmen to lande linde bæron.

(Mld 94b-99)

(‘God alone knows who will control the battlefield.’ Then the wolves of slaughter advanced west over the Pante, the band of vikings cared nothing for the water; the sailors carried their shields, bore their linden shields, over the shining water to land.)

The contrast between Byrhtnoð’s faith and the savagery of the vikings could hardly be more pointed, whatever the poet may have thought of the wisdom of Byrhtnoð’s action.

The other maxims in this set have this same concern with death, including the one from The Fortunes of Men, which, following the maxim, proceeds to list not so much the fortunes but the misfortunes of men, and a wide variety of means of death. Thus the set in this case coincides with the maxims; formula, system, theme and function together determine the set and the set is a gnomic one. The way the formula is used in the charm highlights different, though not unrelated concerns, since even the charm is broadly about health.

Another set might be the following:

a. swa bið geoguðe þeaw,

þær þæs ealdres egsa ne styreð. (Glc 419b-20)

(That is the way it is with novices, where there is no fear of the abbot.)¹⁷

b. swa bið feonda þeaw

þonne hy soðfæstra sawle willað

synnum beswican ond searocræftum.

(Glc 566b-68)

(That is the way it is with devils, when they want to deceive the souls of the righteous with sins and treacheries.)

c. Swa bið scinna þeaw,

deofla wise, þæt he drohtende

þurh dyrne meaht duguðe beswicað.

(Whl 31b-33)

(That is the way it is with demons, the habit of devils—by deceitful power they lead astray those living in virtue.)

Here once again the general outlines of the set are clear enough: þeaw is the constant, the variant terms, geoguðe, feonda, scinna relate to causers of trouble (the novices turn to idleness and vanity where there is no fear of the abbot, the poet of Guthlac tells us), and the theme and function of the set is to demonstrate ‘the deleterious habits of the given class of beings’. There is a related formula in Beowulf:

d. Ne bið swylc cwenlic þeaw

idese to efnanne. þeah ðe hio ænlicu sy,

þætte freoðuwebbe feores onsæce

æfter ligeorne leofne mannan. (1940b-43)

(That is not at all the queenly way, what a lady should do—that
a peace-weaver, however beautiful she may be, should demand
the life of dear man because of an imaginary injury.)

Here, to fit with the ‘deleterious habits’ theme, the poet uses a negative construction, effectively contrasting nature (cwenlic, ides), appearance (ænlic) and role (freoðuwebbe) with what Pryð actually did. A similar formula in Andreas reveals the difference between what constitutes a member of the maxim set, and expressions sharing the same formula:

Swa is þære menigo þeaw

þæt hie uncuðra ængum ne willað

on þam folcstede feores geunnan,

sybpan manfulle on Mermedonia

onfindan feasceaftne. (177b-81a)

(That’s the way it is with that lot—they do not allow anyone
they do not know to live, when they, the wicked, discover such
a wretch in their land.)

Interestingly this passage, while drawing on the ‘deleterious habits’ theme, uses the slightly different is form of the verb as well as the demonstrative þære to indicate that this is a description of a specific people, not a generalisation. The set therefore retains its gnomic coherence here as well as in ‘god ana wat’.

There are other sets of maxims which could be treated in the same way, and in Chapter 4 I will use this notion of the set to explore a larger group of maxims; but enough has been said here to show that the poets used the tradition in a creative way to give expression to their own concerns and interests. Not only that, but it is clear that the relationship between the poets and their material was a dynamic one, and at the same time can be shown to be a thematically coherent one. They used traditional forms, but they also poured new material into established moulds, thus recreating the tradition. By a process of incremental repetition, each use of the maxim form explores new aspects of its significance and adds new resonance to the inherited expression.

Two rather similar maxims in Beowulf will serve to illustrate the difference between maxims which are alike and those which form a set.

Wyrd oft nereð

unfægne eorl, þonne his ellen deah.

(527b-8)

(Fate often spares the undoomed warrior when his courage
holds out.)

and

Swa mæg unfæge eaðe gedigan

wean ond wræcsið se þe waldendes

hylde gehealdeþ. (2291-93a)

(So the undoomed man, upheld by the Lord's mercy, can easily
survive woe and misery.)

The two expressions are maxims and most editors give them as cross-references. Significant similarities include the fact that the only examples of the adjective / substantive unfæge in Beowulf occur in these maxims; the verbs deah and gedigan are related etymologically; and wyrd and God seem to have similar functions, as Klaeber noted.¹⁸ But the construction and phrasing of the maxims is quite different, and there is no maxim formula common to both.

SUMMARY

In my review of earlier analysis of the gnome and maxim, I have shown the limitations of purely descriptive and classifying definitions, and that there is a place for a clear and economical prescriptive account of the forms. The focus on the verbs in these expressions has indicated that while sceal and bið are characteristic, they are also extremely flexible and leave open a wide range of translation and interpretation. Indeed, I suggest that a salient feature of the form is ambiguity. Having given what I believe to be an adequate definition of the gnome and maxim, I have shown how recent developments in formulaic theory can highlight the fact that some maxims were of relatively fixed form and had closely definable functions. The notion of a set, a formulaic construct which gives attention to both relative fixity of form and flexibility of content, when applied to the maxims is found to reflect real patterns within the Old English corpus.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 2

1. J. W. Rankin, rev. of Williams, JEGP, 15 (1916), 163.
2. H. Munro Chadwick and N. Kershaw Chadwick, The Growth of Literature, 3 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932-40; repr. 1986), I, pp. 377-403.
3. 'Hrothgar's "Sermon" in Beowulf as Parental Wisdom', ASE, 10 (1982), 53-67.
4. The Old English Catalogue Poems, Anglistica, 23 (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1985).
5. Michael Polanyi, Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958), p. 21.
6. Shippey, 'Maxims', p. 42, concludes from this and other examples of narrative contradiction of maxims, 'Maxims like these, above all, are not meant to be verified or criticised, but simply assented to.' This is true, but only half the truth: simple observation of the corpus of maxims shows that most are hedged with riders of all kinds, suggesting there were those who verified and criticised as well as those who assented.
7. '"Is" and "Ought" in the Exeter Book Maxims', Southern Folklore Quarterly, 45 (1981), 109-121.
8. Stanley B. Greenfield and Richard Evert, 'Maxims II: Gnome and Poem', in Anglo-Saxon Poetry: Essays in Appreciation for John C. McGalliard, ed. by Lewis E. Nicholson and Dolores Warwick Frese (Notre Dame: Notre

Dame University Press, 1975), pp. 337-54.

9. George Philip Krapp, 'The Parenthetic Exclamation in Old English Poetry', MLN, 20 (1905), 33-37.

10. Stanley. B. Greenfield, 'The Authenticating Voice in Beowulf', ASE, 5 (1976), 51-62.

11. Robert B. Burlin, 'Gnomic Indirection in Beowulf' in Nicholson and Frese, pp. 41-49.

12. A. J. Bliss, 'Single Half-Lines in Old English Poetry', NQ, 216 (1971), 442-49.

13. The analysis of the 'God ana wat' maxims which follows is a generalised version of a paper which focused particularly on The Phoenix: see Paul Cavill, 'Biblical Realignment of a Maxim in the Old English Phoenix, Lines 355b-60', Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester, 77 (1995), 193-98 (The Bible and Early English Literature from the Beginnings to 1500, Proceedings of the Second G. L. Brook Symposium Held in the University of Manchester 1993, ed. by A. R. Rumble et al. [Manchester: John Rylands University Library of Manchester, 1995]).

14. 'The Old English Formula in Context', Speculum, 60 (1985), 294-317.

15. Lactantius, Carmen de Ave Phoenice. Text from The Phoenix, ed. by N.F. Blake, rev. edn (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1990), pp. 92-96.

16. Translation from Sources and Analogues of Old English Poetry: The Major Latin Texts in Translation, ed. by Michael J. B. Allen and Daniel G. Calder (Cambridge: Brewer, 1976), pp. 113-20 (p. 117).

17. For a discussion of the phrases leading to this translation, see The Guthlac Poems of the Exeter Book, ed. by Jane Roberts (Oxford: Clarendon

Press, 1979), p. 145 note.

18. Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburh, 3rd edn (Boston: Heath, 1950), p. xlix, quoting these two maxims, observes, 'the functions of fate and God seem quite parallel.'

CHAPTER 3

THE MAXIM AND THE PROVERB

In the preface to his 'unpretentious volume', Early English Proverbs: Chiefly of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries,¹ Skeat remarks,

I can find no clear proof that the bulk of [the proverbs] or even a large number of them, were already familiar to our ancestors in the days before the Norman Conquest. Indeed, most of our Old English writings contain nothing of the kind. On this point the reader may consult Kemble's work entitled 'Solomon and Saturn,' in which the subject is considered; at p. 257, we read that 'proverbs, strictly so called, are very rare in Saxon books, their authors being for the most part more occupied with reproducing in English the wisdom of the Latins, than in recording the deep but humorous philosophy of our own people.'

(pp. v-vi)

One of the difficulties in paroemiology is what exactly 'proverbs, strictly so called' might actually be. Defining the proverb has, over the years, practically defeated all who have attempted it.² With this difficulty in defining the proverb goes a further problem, which is distinguishing the proverb from the maxim. I will briefly outline some of the means of identification that have been used for proverbs, and then discuss the proverb in actual usage.

In relation to the Old English corpus there seem to be three main lines of interpretation. Firstly, there are those who take the etymological meaning of ‘proverb’ to be definitive: a proverb consists of a form of words which was already in existence, a pre-formed saying. Quoting F. Mone, Williams was of the opinion that ‘through dissemination [...] gnomic sentences may become proverbs’ (p. 7); similarly, quoting Heusler, Larrington suggests a criterion of ‘common and recognised use’ along with style of ‘wording or metaphorical nature’ (p. 5). But the criterion of dissemination, while it has some bearing on the matter, is not crucial: dissemination tends to fix the terms of an expression, and a fixed form is distinctive, but the formulaic maxims beginning ‘God ana wat’ examined above are both widely disseminated and of relatively fixed form, but are not proverbs. In the next chapter I discuss highly distinctive sets of formulas, some of which have a consistency of terminology and theme, but which cannot be proverbs in the strict sense because of such features as flexibility of word order, variation, and simply the length of the different expressions.

The second line of interpretation is to take the metaphorical nature of proverbs as definitive. This will not cover all proverbial expressions, but it is arguably a property of ‘proverbs, strictly so called’. T. A. Shippey sees the distinction between proverb and maxim as ‘the latter being general and literal, the former particular but metaphorical’ (PWL, p. 12). Later he observes ‘if “Licgende beam læsest groweþ”, ‘The fallen tree grows least,’ [Mx1 158] does not have a proverbial implication, it is virtually meaningless’

(p. 13). The first statement may be generally true, but there is not very much evidence for metaphorical application of proverbs in common Old English usage, as the quotation from Kemble implicitly admits. Moreover, Bede, and Donatus before him, would have regarded paroemia (proverb) in the metaphorical sense as a trope, sententia (maxim) as a scheme.³

Nigel Barley sees the characteristic feature of the proverb as its essentially metaphorical nature: it is a 'standard statement of moral or categorical imperatives in fixed metaphorical paradigmatic form. It deals with fundamental logical relationships' (p. 741, Barley's emphasis).⁴ Barley analyses some of the Durham Proverbs and shows how the paradigmatic relationships might function. For example 'A entails opposite of A' in Durham Proverb 29, 'Ne wat swetes ðanc se þe biteres ne onbyrgeð' (the person who has not tasted the bitter cannot appreciate the sweet) or 'concern for A implies no concern for means B' in Durham Proverb 41, 'Ne sceall se for horse murnan se þe wile heort ofærnan' (the one who wants to run down the hart should not care about the horse). Barley gives what he calls maxim paraphrases which generalise the particulars of these expressions ('he who has not experienced the bad cannot appreciate the good' and 'a man with a goal must not care about those he uses to achieve it' [sic]), without perhaps recognising that they are already maxims, and that the metaphorical aspects he discerns are in fact his own construction, reasonable though they are.⁵ As Shippey observes, 'proverbs in the end consist of "statement + context", and once the context is lost the point is also' (PWL, p. 13).⁶ This remark is

applied by Shippey to the Old English Maxims poems, where there is no real reason to believe that the expressions are proverbs (see below, and Chapter 7). It has much more relevance to a collection like the Durham Proverbs: here, it would be context which finally proved any metaphorical sense, and these proverbs have no context.

The third line of approach is my own, and that is to examine those expressions which are called something equivalent to ‘proverb’ in their context in order to deduce the typical features, and observe any differences of the form from that of the maxim. Proverbs or sayings that are labelled as such, with terms like word, biword, bispell, cwide, wordcwide (all approximately ‘saying’), swa hit gecweden is (as it is said), are found in various Old English prose sources (in verse they tend to mean ‘speech’). The labelling in prose presupposes the first proverbial criterion mentioned above: these are identifiably current sayings, though we do not always have evidence other than the labelling to prove their currency in Old English.

In the Ælfredian translation of Boethius’s Consolatio Philosophiae, there are several proverbs which appear to be added to, or changed from, the source, two in chapter 14 and one in chapter 41:⁷

1. Se ealda cwide is swiþe soþ þe mon gefyrn cwæþ, þætte þa micles bepurfon þe micle agan willaþ, 7 þa þurfon swiþe lytles þe maran ne willniap þonne genoges. (21-23, p. 31)

(The old proverb that used to be said is very true, that they

need much who desire to possess much, and they need little
who ask for no more than enough.)

2. [...] þone ealdan cwide þe mon gefyrn sang, þæt se nacoda
wegferend him nanwuht ne ondrede. (13-14, p. 33)

(... the old proverb that used to be sung, that the naked
traveller fears nothing.)

3. [...] se cwide ðe he cwæþ, swa mon ma swincþ, swa mon
maran mede onfehþ. (14-15, p. 143)

(... the proverb that he [God] said, "the more a man works, the
greater the reward he receives".)

The first two of these can be paralleled from many sources, medieval and later. The first is proverb M790 in Bartlett Jere Whiting's Proverbs, Sentences and Proverbial Phrases From English Writings Mainly Before 1500,⁸ where the ultimate source seems to be Boethius, but the proverb is given an authentic English form; the second is from Juvenal's tenth Satire, 19-22, and has various Early Modern parallels as listed in The Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs, p. 554.⁹ The third appears to be a version of some biblical passage such as I Corinthians 3. 8, 'unusquisque autem propriam mercedem accipiet secundum suum laborem'. Only the second of these invites a metaphorical interpretation, and even that is literal in the original context.

A proverb occurs in the annal for 1003 in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle,¹⁰ only in the Laud MS, though there are parallels elsewhere for the saying which the writer uses.

4. Đa sceolde se ealdorman Ælfric lædan þa fyrde. ac he teah forð
 þa his ealdan wrenceas. Sona swa hi wæron swa ge hende þet
 ægðer heora on oðer hawede. þa ge bræd he hine seocne. 7
 ongan hine brecan to spiwenne. 7 cweð þet he ge siclod wære.
 7 swa þæt folc beswac þæt he lædan sceolde swa hit ge cweðen
 is. Ðonne se heretoga wacað þonne bið eall se here swiðe
 gehindred. (I, p. 135)

(Ealdormon Ælfric had to lead the army, but he showed his old
 wiles. As soon as the armies were close enough to see each
 other, he pretended to be ill, and made himself retch, and said
 that he was taken ill, and thus betrayed the army that he ought
 to have led. As the proverb has it, ‘when the leader is
 cowardly, then all the army is greatly set back’.)

Plummer notes a parallel from Alcuin, ‘Si dux timidus erit, quomodo
 saluabitur miles?’ (II, p. 183), and to that should be added Durham Proverb
 31, ‘Eall here byþ hwæt þonne se lateow byþ hwæt’ (‘all the army is brave
 when its general is brave’, Arngart [1981], p. 288). Here, as before, the
 proverb is applied purely in a literal sense.

Rather later in the Chronicle, 1130, the writer comments on his own
 monastery’s independence of Cluny despite intrigues:

5. man seið to biworde, hæge sitteð þa aceres dæleth.
 (there is a proverb which says, ‘Hedge abides that fields
 divides’).¹¹

In this biword, the metaphorical application in the original context is a relatively unusual, and perhaps novel, feature. The late date of the expression may be significant.

Another proverb so called in the text is found in the Old English Dicts of Cato, 29:¹²

6. Ðonne þu geseo gingran mann ðonne ðu sie, 7 unwisran 7
unspedigran, þonne geþenc ðu hu oft se ofercymð oðerne, ðe
hine ær ofercom: swa mann on ealdum bigspellum cwið, þæt
hwilum beo esnes tid, hwilum oðres.

(When you see a younger, less wise and less wealthy person than yourself, think then how often one overcomes something, after having previously been overcome by it. As the old proverb says, ‘now it is the young man’s opportunity, now another’s.’)

The proverb is added to the paraphrase of the Latin text, and because of the archaic features of the language, Cox believes it is a genuinely old proverb (p. 21). Bosworth-Toller Supplement, s.v. esne notes the meaning ‘young man’ in gospel glosses for adolescens and juvenis, which might mark the usage as early, since elsewhere it normally means ‘servant’. There seems to be no metaphorical application here.

In an expression of Byrhtferð’s, metaphorical application is explicit:

7. þæt wat eall ceorlisc folc þæt grene latucas beoð bitere, swa

synt þa rican men to þreagenne. (III.I, 77-79, p. 126)

(All rustic people know that green lettuce is bitter, as rich men
are bitter to chastise.)

It is difficult, despite the reference to rustic people and the parallelism, to know whether this is a genuine proverb or just a fanciful illustration in Byrhtferð's exposition of the Passover meal, where lettuce is the equivalent to the 'bitter herbs'. At any rate, if the expression is a proverb, Byrhtferð could not rely on his audience to make the metaphorical connection for themselves.

There are many proverbs in Old English prose which draw particularly on biblical, patristic and classical sources. I do not include these here because they are not always fully naturalised, and cannot be used as sources from which to deduce the characteristics of native proverbs. Two proverbs are mentioned by Bede,¹³ and they must be of popular origin, even if there is no untranslated vernacular parallel for the first. Of the peaceful days of King Edwin Bede writes, 'sicut usque hodie in prouerbio dicitur, etiam si mulier una cum recens nato paruulo uellet totam perambulare insulam a mari ad mare, nullo se ledente ualeret' (as it is said in the current proverb, if a lone woman with a new-born child travelled the island from one coast to the other, no harm would come to her, HE II, 16); and of the saintly Oswald, 'Deus miserere animabus, dixit Osuald cadens in terram' ('God have mercy on [their] souls', said Oswald as he fell to the earth, HE III, 12), which is a kind of early Wellerism known to Ælfric. Ælfric's version in Skeat, Lives of the

Saints, II, p. 136, '[...] and þus clypode on his fylle . God gemiltsa urum sawlum' (... he cried thus as he died, 'God have mercy on our souls'), might indicate a deliberate change of focus in the pronoun he employs, or perhaps that proverbial variation has occurred in repeated tellings. And there is a proverb in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, anno 81, about Titus, 'seþe sæde þæt he þone dæg forlure þe he noht to gode on ne gedyde' (who said that he lost the day on which he had done no good), from a classical source.¹⁴ These last two are 'quotation proverbs', but none of these has a specifically metaphorical application.

Perhaps the most interesting use of proverbs, in terms of any distinction between them and maxims, are two found in Wulfstan's homily De Septiformi Spiritu (Bethurum IX), parts of which are found in a composite homily from Corpus Christi College Cambridge 419 / 421.¹⁵ Wulfstan outlines some of the ways that Antichrist deceives people, and then goes on to put in the Antichrist's mouth, as it were, some popular sayings, which the homilist subsequently refutes:

8, 9 and 10.

[Antecrist [...]] and þa þeodlogan] cwepað þæt to worde þæt se bið on gepance wærast 7 wisast se ðe oðerne can raðost asmeagan 7 oftost of unwæran sum ðing geræcan. Cwepað eac to worde þa ðe syndan stunte, þæt micel forhæfednes lytel behealde, ac þæt mete wære mannum gescapen to ðam anum þæt men his scoldan brucan, 7 wimman to hæmede þam ðe þæs

lyste.

(p. 190)

([Antichrist and great liars] say as a proverb that he is sharpest and wisest of mind who can most readily contrive and most often deprive the unwary of something. The foolish also say as a proverb that asceticism is of little importance, but that food was made for the sole purpose that people should eat it, and woman for the purpose of sexual intercourse for those who desire it. Proverbs emphasised.)

Wulfstan quotes these sayings as proverbs, and they may have been genuinely popular. The last proverb has a sixteenth-century parallel, 'All meats to be eaten, and all maids to be wed'.¹⁶ Wulfstan's hæmed is ambiguous, referring either to sexual intercourse or to marriage, and it might be further observed that this last proverb shows a misogynistic tendency, which by the sixteenth century has been toned down somewhat, but which remains characteristic of the genre. None of the proverbs is metaphorically applied, though the last could be applied to many situations where appetite and morality or convention were at odds.

But as Wulfstan goes on to say,

And soð is þæt ic secge, mid eal swylcan laran Antecrist
cwemeð 7 laðlice forlæreð ealles to manege. Forðam nis æfre
ænig lagu wyrse on worulde þonne hwa folgie eallinge his luste
7 his lust him to lage sylfum gesette. [...] Ac se bið gesælig

se ðe gewarnað huru hine sylfne be ænigum dæle.

(pp. 190-91).

(But the truth is, as I say, that by means of all such teachings, Antichrist entices and hatefully leads astray all too many. For never in the world is there any worse law than that someone should entirely indulge his inclination, and set his own inclination up as law for himself ... But he is blessed who looks to himself to any degree.)

Wulfstan acknowledges the persuasiveness of such popular proverbs, and the tendency for them to become, in the popular mind, guides to action, rules of thumb, approved principles. The disparagement of proverbs among the educated noticed in Chapter 1 seems to be present even in Wulfstan. He wishes to stress that to use proverbs in this way is to establish as law for oneself something that is not based on truth, and is ultimately from the Antichrist. He resists the rhetoric of form in the proverb, of rhyme, contrast and parallelism, and commends self-suspicion by means of direct and unambiguous statement in the form of maxims.

There is a verse maxim in Genesis B which makes the same point as Wulfstan's last maxim in a negative form:

Bið þam men full wa

þe hine ne warnað þonne he geweald hafað!

(634b-35)

(Great woe it is to the man who does not take warning when he

can.)

Shippey has explored the proverbial development of this maxim ('Maxims', pp. 37-38) and many other maxims of this general kind exist. But the point remains that Wulfstan can be seen to be countering what he considers to be unchristian popular proverbial rhetoric with a plain and explicitly Christian rhetoric in the maxims.

I have given a small corpus of what appear to be genuine Old English proverbs, numbered 1-10 above, as used by writers who are not (in most cases) specifically collecting proverbs, and who give some indication in the context that they are quoting. There may be others, but the corpus is sufficient to make some generalisations moderately safe. Of the ten, only the Middle English one in the Chronicle (5) has a direct metaphorical application without explanation, suggesting perhaps that the metaphorical dimension is a late development. All are in prose. All have distinct rhetorical patterning, whether in concepts, sounds, or structure. This last feature is worth illustrating at greater length.

In proverb 1 there are two parts linked by the verb purfan, and in the first part there is parallelism, micles, micle, in the second contrast, lytles, maran. Proverb 2 has alliteration for the two main concepts, nacod and nanwuht. Proverb 3 has syntactic parallelism and repetition, swa mon ma ... swa mon maran. Similarly, proverb 4: Donne ... ðonne. Proverb 5 is less obviously patterned, though there is conceptual opposition and similar present-

tense verb endings in the verbs sitteð and dæleth. Proverb 6 has parallelism of syntax, hwilum ... hwilum. In 7, the repetition of biter is implied by the phrasing. In Wulfstan's proverbs 8 to 10, there are two sets of rhyming superlatives -ast and -ost, and contrast between the wære and the unwære in the first expression; a precise quadripartite structure with contrast in 'micel forhæfednes lytel behealde', more literally translated 'great abstinence little avails'; and conceptual and syntactic parallelism in the different saying which Wulfstan has associated with the proverb disparaging asceticism, which has the paradigmatic structure 'as A is the proper object of action X, so B is the proper object of action Y'. In this last case the paradigmatic relationship between the elements is clearer than the linguistic patterning.

It is the structural taxonomy of the proverb that Alan Dundes believes to be definitive of the form.¹⁷ The conclusion he arrives at is as follows:

The proverb appears to be a traditional propositional statement consisting of at least one descriptive element, a descriptive element consisting of a topic and a comment. This means that proverbs must have at least two words. Proverbs which contain a single descriptive element are nonoppositional. Proverbs with two or more descriptive elements may be either oppositional or non-oppositional. 'Like father, like son' would be an example of a multi-descriptive element proverb which was nonoppositional; 'Man works from sun to sun but woman's work is never done' would be an example of a multi-descriptive

element proverb which is oppositional (man / woman; finite work / infinite or endless work). Non-oppositional multi-descriptive element proverbs emphasize identificational features, often in the form of an equation or series of equal terms; oppositional proverbs emphasize contrastive features often in the form of negation or a series of terms in complementary distribution. Some proverbs contain both identificational and contrastive features.

(p. 115, Dundes' hyphenation)

The application of this description to the Old English proverbs needs little demonstration. Proverb 1 is a multi-descriptive element proverb that is oppositional, as are 5 (possibly), 6 and 9. Proverbs 3, 4, 7, 8 and 10 are multi-descriptive non-oppositional proverbs. Proverb 2 seems to be a single descriptive element proverb, though it might be read as multi-descriptive and non-oppositional (no clothes: no fear).

Dundes' description is essentially paradigmatic, and can easily be translated into Barley's terminology. The non-oppositional proverb in the Chronicle, 4, can be paradigmatically described, 'when the most important of the group is lacking, then the group suffers'. Similarly with the others: 'great desire—great need: little desire—little need' (1), and so on. The potential for metaphorical application in proverbs is at least in part a result of this paradigmatic aspect of the form. Once it is recognised that there is some underlying pattern in the expression, a pattern that exists independently of the

specificities, then the saying can be applied in a metaphorical sense to an analogous situation. But it should be emphasised again that the Old English writers do not apply their proverbs in this way.

‘PROVERBIALITY’ AND MAXIMS

There is a wide assumption that gnomes, maxims and proverbs are all basically similar. There are indeed areas of overlap: the fundamental similarity between them is that they employ descriptive strategies. Gnomes tend to be shorter, with minimal syntax, whereas maxims are longer and more complex syntactically, but like gnomes, work at a literal level. Proverbs may be either literal or metaphorical or both, mapping one set of descriptive categories onto another in a paradigmatic relationship. I would like to retain the notion of ‘proverbiality’ for maxims and gnomes, that is, that they would be recognisable to the audience, and perform certain functions by virtue of their form.

Some maxims fulfil the criterion of dissemination that was proposed by other writers as definitive of the proverb above. There are parallel maxims in Old English verse and other sources we have no substantial reason for thinking to be directly related, and the degree of similarity is one which goes well beyond the formulaic. T. A. Shippey coins the term ‘proverbiousness’ for this similarity, and discusses it in relation to The Wanderer and The Seafarer, pointing out the following parallels:¹⁸

Dol bið se þe his dryhten nat, to þæs oft cymeð deað

unþinged. (Mx1 35)

(He is foolish who does not know his Lord; death often comes suddenly to such.)

and

Dol bið se þe him his dryhten ne ondrædeð; cymeð him se

deað unþinged. (Sfr 106)

(He is foolish who does not fear his Lord; death comes suddenly to him.)

Then:

Stýran sceal mon strongum mode. (MxI 50a)

(One steers [rules] by means of a strong mind.)

and:

Stieran mon sceal strongum mode. (Sfr 109a)

(A headstrong spirit must be controlled.)¹⁹

He also notes the similarity of The Wanderer's lines (65b f., especially 68a) on the wise man and Durham Proverb 23, 'Ne sceal man to ær forht ne to ær fægen' (No one must be too quickly frightened, nor too easily pleased).

Beyond the lyrics in which Shippey was particularly interested, there are other parallels which might be mentioned. For example, concerning the Last Judgement, Christ has:

Wel is þam þe motun

on þa grimman tid gode lician.

(1079b-80)

(It is well with those who are able to please God in that
dreadful time.)

and The Phoenix has:

Wel bið þam þe mot
in þa geomran tid gode lician.

(516b-17)

(It is well with the one who is able to please God in that
sorrowful time.)

Also from Maxims I is a passage strongly similar to the opening of The
Fortunes of Men:

Tu beoð gemæccan;
sceal wif ond wer in woruld cennan
bearn mid gebyrdum. (Mx1 23b-25a)

(Two are mates: by birth a woman and a man bring children
into the world.)

and:

Ful oft þæt gegongeð, mid godes meahtum
þætte wer ond wif in woruld cennað
bearn mid gebyrdum. (FtM 1-3a)

(It happens very often by God's power that a man and a
woman bring children into the world by birth.)

These parallels all occur in the pages of the Exeter Book. But there
are two copies of a little poem called Latin-English Proverbs in the Krapp-

Dobbie collection, a parallel line to which appears in the Riming Poem 67, ‘searohwit solap, sumorhat colað’ (bright whiteness gets dirty, the heat of summer cools),²⁰ and compare also Judgment Day I 37b, ‘hat biþ acolod’ (the heat has cooled). The Latin-English Proverbs are used in a somewhat developed form in the Middle English poem The Owl and the Nightingale:²¹

Ardor frigesscit, nitor squalescit,

amor abolescit, lux obtenebrescit.

Hat acolað, hwit asolað,

leof alaðap, leoht aðystrað.

Senescunt omnia que ęterna non sunt.

Æghwæt forealdað þæs þe ece ne byð.

(Heat grows cold, white becomes dirty, the beloved becomes hated, light becomes dark. Everything which is not eternal decays with age.)

These lines become:

Nis nout so hot þat hit nacleþ,

Ne nogt so hwit þat hit ne soleþ,

Ne nogt so leof þat hit ne aloþeþ,

Ne nogt so glad þat hit ne awroþeþ:

Ah eauere euh þing þat eche nis

Agon schal, & al þis worldes blis. (1275-80)

(There is nothing so hot it does not grow cold, nothing so white it does not become dirty, nothing so loved it does not become hated, nothing so cheerful it does not get angry. But

everything that is not eternal shall pass away, and all this world's joy.)

It is interesting that the Middle English poet converts the Old English gnomes into maxims in the course of his expansion. The poet of The Owl and the Nightingale also knew a prose proverb occurring in the Cotton Faustina manuscript of the Latin-English Proverbs, as it appears as lines 135-38 of his poem, and, as Stanley notes (p. 107), in Marie de France.²² In the Royal manuscript of the Latin-English Proverbs, there are two proverbs which are also collected in the Durham Proverbs.²³

It may be significant that of the parallel phrases noted above, it is the ones with Latin accompaniment that survive into Middle English and later, not the obviously Old English maxims. While I maintain that there is a distinction between maxims and proverbs, these parallels in verse point to the traditional nature and the occasionally fixed form of some gnomes and maxims, features shared by proverbs. Greater fixity of form is characteristic of proverbs; relative variability within limits, formulaic, syntactic, and indeed semantic, is characteristic of maxims, as has already been seen in Chapter 2.

What is clear from maxims generally is that the paradigmatic relation between the terms is not one that immediately gives rise to metaphorical application. If we were to put a typical maxim into paradigmatic terms, it would immediately appear less tightly structured and lacking the transferable parallelism of the Old English and other proverbs. Compare 'A entails

opposite of A' (Barley's paradigm for Durham Proverb 29, as above) or 'as A is for B, so C is for D' (Wulfstan, proverb 10 above), with 'A always / often / never happens when / if condition B obtains', or 'A is (the same as) / better than / worse than B', or 'people are foolish / blessed / wretched if they do X / do not do Y'. The maxim, then, formally, linguistically and paradigmatically is a literal rather than a metaphorical expression. Its taxonomic features are different from those of the proverb in Old English.

To return to Shippey's statement that 'if "Licgende beam læsest groweþ", 'The fallen tree grows least,' [Mx1 158] does not have a proverbial implication, it is virtually meaningless' (PWL, p. 13), in which assertion he is joined by Sarah Lynn Higley, 'as literal statements they are bafflingly obvious' (p. 150): the example chosen is one of many maxims that approach tautology, without being in the least metaphorical, or having a 'proverbial implication'. The effectiveness of this type of maxim based on observation is that it is a complete and irrefragable statement of fact. I argue in Chapter 7 that gnomes and maxims form the basis of a world view, and are, in the aggregate, epistemological and axiomatic statements. Philosophically speaking, the most effective proposition takes the form of a logical tautology, because it cannot meaningfully be contradicted. I take 'licgende beam læsest groweþ' to be that kind of statement.

PROVERBS IN THE MAXIMS

There are proverbs from various sources in Maxims I:

efenfela bega

peoda ond þeawa (17b-18a)

(as many customs as there are tribes),

of which Skeat remarks, ‘this is [...] well known in most of the European languages, [...] in more than sixty forms’ (Early English Proverbs, p. vii):

Bliþe sceal bealoleas heorte (39a)

(happy is the innocent in heart),

from Matthew 5. 8, ‘Beati mundo corde’;²⁴

Lef mon læces behofað (45a)

(the sick person needs a doctor),

from Matthew 9. 12, ‘Non est opus valentibus medicus, sed male habentibus’;²⁵

Mæg god syllan

eadgum æhte ond eft niman (155b-56)

(God can give possessions to the blessed, and take them back),

which probably derives from ‘Dominus dedit, Dominus abstulit’, Job 1. 21 (Williams, p. 142 note);

Swa monige beoþ men ofer eorþan, swa beoþ modgeþoncas

(167)

(so many people on earth, so many minds),

probably ultimately from Terence, ‘Quot homines, tot sententiae’ (Williams, p. 143 note, and Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs, p. 525). There are some elements of parallelism in these, particularly the first and last, but they are recognisable as proverbs principally because they are from other sources

in which there are parallels.

Other expressions in Maxims I have been thought to be proverbial.

For example:

God bið genge ond wiþ god lenge.

(121)

(good prevails and lasts before God.)²⁶

Here there is rhyme and punning. Nelson, "'Is" and "Ought"', p. 114, suggests 103b-104a,

a mon sceal seþeah leofes wenan,

gebidan þæs he gebædan ne mæg

(a person must always be in expectation of the loved one,
waiting for what cannot be compelled),

adducing the wordplay. And lines 54-56,

Swa biþ sæ smilte

þonne hy wind ne weceð;

swa beoþ þeoda geþwære, þonne hy geþingad habbað.

(Just as the sea is calm when the wind does not stir it, so also
the peoples are at peace when they have negotiated together.)

Though these lines are somewhat laborious, they are also notable in that they are an extended simile, at least partly in the form of a ljóðahátt strophe (Williams, p. 134, note to line 55 f.), and show comprehensive parallelism. If this was not a proverb, it was a good attempt at making one like the example from *Byrhtferð*, 7 above.

Karl Schneider has attempted to refine the notion of proverbial parallelism by suggesting that proverbs were coined in rhythmical units which can be notated in musical fashion in measures and bars.²⁷ This is not fundamentally implausible, as the frequent parallelism of the native proverbs has already been observed. But when applied to the poetry, where the theory fits, the measures correspond to half-line metrical units; and where the theory does not fit, Schneider appears to make the verses up:

Some OE proverbs are arranged in a four-line stanza, the Ljóðahátt-stanza, with the line bar-structure 4-3-4-3, thus in Maxims I, 66f.:

Sceomiande man sceal in sceade hweorfan,
 scir in leohte scriðan.
 Hælende hond sceal heafod inwyrcean,
 hord mid hordum bidan.

Here each line contains one proverb. Another example is Maxims I, 22f.:

Ræd sceal mid snyttro, riht mid wisum,
 til sceal mid tilum beon.
 Sceal wif ond wer in worold cennan
 bearn mid strongum gebyrdum.

Here the stanza contains three proverbs: a 4-bar, 3-bar and (4+3)-bar proverb. (p. 31)²⁸

There is no meaningful way of referring to these 'proverbs', interesting though they are, as from Maxims I. In the last example, it would be difficult

to suggest a sensible meaning for strongum, but it would also be unnecessary, as it does not occur in the manuscript. Where proverbs occur in verse, it is generally the fact that a source can be found for them that reveals their proverbial nature; otherwise the crafting and parallelism merges into the poetic background.

SUMMARY

Scholars have often been content to accept that maxims and gnomes are proverbial types of utterance, and have relied on the fact that they have 'the ring of proverbial wisdom'.²⁹ What I have tried to show in this chapter is that there is, nevertheless, a distinction between gnomes and maxims on the one hand and proverbs on the other. Proverbs are used as pre-formed sayings, they develop metaphorical applications, they fit the structural description of Dundes, particularly in having oppositional or non-oppositional parallelism, and they have a paradigmatic transferability which allows them to be used metaphorically. The vernacular proverbs examined earlier demonstrate these features.

Some maxims are pre-formed, but for the most part they are variable and flexible combinations of formulas. I strongly doubt that they are intended metaphorically, and there is little evidence for it; they do not generally develop the structural parallelism, and they do not show the paradigmatic transferability that we find in proverbs. But the impression we have of maxims being traditional is not merely instinctual. Certainly the form was not

unique to the Anglo-Saxons, and other Germanic peoples recognised its value and utility, and expressed similar kinds of ideas in similar ways. Some Old English maxims became relatively fixed expressions. This suggests that they were not the exclusive preserve of one or two poets, but reflected a wider popularity. And the relative frequency of maxims occurring at junctures where an impression of authority, or rhetorical impact, were required, indicates that the poets could rely on their audience recognising and understanding the form as a kind of emphatic discourse marker. In all, this argues that the form was distinct, recognisable and functional. Maxims are proverbial but not proverbs.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 3

1. Ed. by Walter W. Skeat (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910).
2. Archer Taylor, The Proverb (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931) is reduced to the blandest of generalisations, 'the proverb is a saying current among the folk' (p. 3).
3. Jackson J. Campbell, 'Knowledge of Rhetorical Figures in Anglo-Saxon England', JEGP, 66 (1967), 1-20, (p. 9).
4. 'A Structural Approach to the Maxim and Proverb, with Special Reference to the Anglo-Saxon Corpus', Proverbium, 20 (1972), 737-50.
5. Some of Durham Proverbs, eg. the Wellerisms (DP 10 etc.), have a less obvious but more necessary metaphorical nature.
6. Both Barley (p. 740, 745) and Shippey (p. 12) want to read the sceal on catalogue of Maxims II as tending towards the proverbial and metaphorical, with Barley's paraphrase 'there is a place for everything' and Shippey's 'a place for everything and everything in its place'. Barley's view is that 'the more concrete a statement, the more likely it is to be a proverb', and Shippey's, that 'if these are literal they are not purposeful'. There is scope for further investigation of what Shippey calls the 'barely imaginable purpose' of these gnomes and maxims, and this forms the basis of the last chapter.
7. King Alfred's Old English Version of Boethius, De Consolatione Philosophiae, ed. by Walter John Sedgefield (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1899).

8. In collaboration with Helen Wescott Whiting (London: Oxford University Press, 1968).
9. Compiled by W. G. Smith, 3rd edn rev. by F. P. Wilson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970).
10. Two of the Saxon Chronicles Parallel: With Supplementary Extracts from the Others, ed. by Charles Plummer, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1892-99).
11. The translation is that of The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, trans. by G. N. Garmonsway (London: Dent, 1972), p. 261.
12. R. S. Cox, Anglia, 90 (1972), 1-42.
13. B. J. Whiting, 'The Nature of the Proverb', Harvard Studies and Notes in Philology and Literature, 14 (1932) 273-307 (p. 285).
14. Dorothy Whitelock, 'The Prose of Alfred's Reign', in Continuations and Beginnings: Studies in Old English Literature, ed. by Eric Gerald Stanley (London: Nelson, 1966), pp. 67-103, notes that both the Orosius and the Chronicle have the proverb, and that it was 'based on Suetonius' via Jerome (p. 74).
15. The Vercelli Homilies and Related Texts, ed. by D. G. Scragg, EETS OS, 300 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 53-65.
16. The Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs, p. 10; and Whiting, Proverbs, Sentences, M470. Neither Whiting nor Smith and Wilson cite the Wulfstan passage.
17. 'On the Structure of the Proverb', in Analytic Essays in Folklore, ed. by Alan Dundes, Studies in Folklore, 2 (The Hague: Mouton, 1975), pp. 103-18.

18. ‘The Wanderer and The Seafarer as Wisdom Poetry’, in Companion to Old English Poetry, ed. by Henk Aertsen and Rolf H. Bremmer, Jr. (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1994) pp. 145-58 (pp. 149-50).

19. Shippey suggests that the two versions are ‘virtually identical’ (‘Wisdom Poetry’ p. 150). However, the maxim in Maxims I bridges two themes, the way to bring up a child, and the storm at sea (possibly as an image of domestic strife). It seems probable to me that the poet was playing on the ambiguity of styrān, ‘steer’, or ‘rule, control’. In The Seafarer, the manuscript reads mod for mon, perhaps reinforcing the wisdom theme there. Williams, p. 167, glosses strongum in the Maxims as dative, and it would make sense as a dative of means. Sarah Lynn Higley, Between Languages: The Uncooperative Text in Early Welsh and Old English Nature Poetry (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), also reads these maxims as ambiguous and as relating in such a way to the context that they have different meanings (p. 160).

20. Noted by Dobbie, ASPR VI, p. cxi.

21. The Owl and the Nightingale, ed. by Eric Gerald Stanley (London: Nelson, 1960).

22. Dobbie, ASPR VI, p. cxi, gives the proverb:

Pomum licet ab arbore igitur unde reuoluitur tamen prouidit
unde nascitur.

Se æppel næfre þæs feorr ne trenddeð he cyð hwanon he com.

(The apple never rolls so far that it does not make known
whence it came.)

For the wider dissemination of the proverb, see Richard Jente, 'German Proverbs from the Orient', PMLA, 48 (1933), 17-37 (pp. 26-30).

23. British Library, Royal MS. 2B. v, has these two proverbs, with which compare Durham Proverbs 37 and 39.

Meliora plura quam grauia honera fiunt.

Selre byð oft feðre þænne oferfeðre.

(‘Better often loaded than overloaded’, Arngart [1981], p. 299.)

Omnis inuocans cupit audiri.

Clipiendra gehwylc wolde þæt him man oncwæde.

(Each one who calls desires a response.)

24. A. Brandl, ‘Geschichte der altenglischen Literatur’, in Grundriss der germanischen Philologie, ed. by H. Paul, 2nd edn (Strassburg: 1901-1909), II, p. 961.

25. Frederick M. Biggs and Sandra McEntire, ‘Spiritual Blindness in the Old English Maxims I, Part I’, NQ, 233 (1988), 11.

26. Bosworth-Toller translation, s.v. geŋge.

27. ‘The English Proverb: Definition—Determination of Age—Models’, Poetica, (Tokyo) 15-16 (1983), 23-48.

28. I cannot represent Schneider’s notational markings, nor is it clear whether the text is Schneider’s or Hanowell’s (referred to in note 19, p. 31), but there is little correspondence between the text quoted and the manuscript readings.

29. Marie Nelson, Structures of Opposition in Old English Poems, Costerus New Series, 74 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1989), p. 17, referring to Solomon’s answer to Saturn’s book riddle (SnS2 230-46).

CHAPTER 4

A GNOMIC FORMULA

The closing lines of The Wanderer and The Seafarer, with their gnomic and homiletic formulas were often supposed to be interpolations or additions by early editors. Of the latter poem from line 103 onwards, Anne L. Klinck observes,

The commencement of a new gathering here, along with the mediocre quality of the rest of the poem and the high proportion of hypermetric lines — including this one [103] — led some earlier scholars to believe that lines 103-24 were not originally part of the same text. (pp. 142-43)¹

Dorothy Whitelock's Fifteenth Edition of Sweet's Anglo-Saxon Reader² still omits lines 109 to the end, thus retaining one echo of Maxims I in line 106, while excising the other echo in line 109. While most scholars now accept both The Wanderer and The Seafarer as unitary, if in places difficult to interpret, the same kind of gnomic and homiletic formulas occur in Beowulf at the end of the third fitt (fitt II in the manuscript marking), and there remains doubt in the minds of many scholars whether the condemnation of the Danes, lines 175-88, culminating in the wa / wel formulas, is not extraneous. I do not claim there is an easy answer to this issue, but I believe some of the difficulties scholars have in accepting the lines can be diminished, and I will return to a consideration of this particular Beowulf passage at the end of the chapter.

THE FORMULA

The chapter focuses on the ‘gnomic formula’ as it is called by Haruko Momma,³ the sets of maxims that feature wa / wel / eadig / dol and other headwords, as in Beowulf 183b-88. The formula itself raises questions of metre and syntax which have occupied different scholars, but it is not principally these matters in which I am interested here. Rather, I intend to consider the functions, contexts and sources of these expressions in their related sets, in order to understand better when, why and how the poets used such maxims.

The forms considered here consist of the structure:

- interjection, adjective or adverb headword
- + unstressed present tense verb (sometimes omitted)
- + demonstrative or personal pronoun in the dative, with or without a noun for ‘person’
- + relative particle (sometimes omitted)
- + complement or adjective clause

This description is looser than Momma’s because it is intended to include expressions which fit the formulaic characteristics of the ‘set’ in Riedinger’s analysis, not just Momma’s metrical criteria. There are many variations on the basic pattern: some examples invert parts of the pattern (not infrequently for good reasons) but keep the same elements of formal structure. I distinguish the different sets according to the headword, as it most often is, though at the end there is a group which fits the general structural criteria, but

contains miscellaneous headwords. Throughout, I include ‘applied maxims’ in square brackets: these most frequently have deictics such as time adverbs or second-person pronouns.

The metrical problem in relation to these expressions is explored in Momma’s article. Bliss remainderers many of the expressions because he cannot find a suitable metrical configuration for them.⁴ He argues against Klaeber (p. 136) and Pope⁵ when they suggest stressing þæm in Beowulf 183b and 186b to give a Sievers Type E, but Momma (pp. 425-26) argues against Bliss’s assumption that they could not be Type B because they contain too many unstressed syllables before the second stress. I do not pretend to be able to resolve this particular issue: its relevance here is that it bears on Riedinger’s theory of sets of formulas, the analysis of which is based on patterns of stressed words.

Riedinger’s theory is that ‘the repetition of one general concept + one system + one function = one formula’ (p. 305). She continues,

A system is a group of verses usually sharing the same meter and syntax in which one word, usually stressed, is constant and the other stressed word or words may be varied to suit the alliterative and/or narrative context. [...] A ‘set’ may be defined as a group of verses usually sharing the same function and system in which one word, usually stressed, is constant, and at least one stressed word may be varied, usually

synonymously, to suit the alliterative and/or narrative context.

(pp. 305-306)

In relation to most Old English formulas this schema works well, as has been seen in Chapter 2. In these verses we have what is undeniably a formula, but one that does not so readily fit the standard metrical criteria. Riedinger admits the possibility that the constant of a formula may be unstressed, and that would allow the group of copula (where present), pronouns and particles to function as the constant, and give a pattern like 'x (bið) þæm þe x'. There is not only some metrical difficulty here in terms of a Sievers analysis, but also the fact that poets seem to have sensed a metrical problem with the form. The formula is quite frequently spread over two or more half-lines by the insertion of nouns or adverbials, which give both more marked stresses and fewer unstressed syllables in a position between the stresses. There are expressions (translated in sets below) like Beowulf 186b, 'Wel bið þæm þe mot [...]', a half-line, and 'and wel is þam ðe þæt wyrcaþ mote' (XSt 364), 'Wel bið þam eorle þe him on innan hafað [...]' (Alm 1), or 'Eadige beoð swylce, þa þe a wyllað [...]' (P118. 2), which contain similar elements spread over a whole line. Since the function of the formula is to specify the kind of person or people who qualify for beatitude or woe, or merit the description of blessed, miserable or stupid: and since the theme in the sets with this particular function is most often generalising about the specifically spiritual or eschatological state of these people, it seems to me reasonable to stretch Riedinger's definition to include the possibility of the formula extending over a whole line. So here, the formula is not invariably bounded by the half-line.

THE SETS

Set 1

- (Gen 634b-35)

sibban heah bringað horda deorast,

gif hi unrædes ær ne geswicap. (R11 8b-10)

(Woe to them for that habit when they bring the dearest of treasures [i.e. the soul] on high, unless they desist from that folly beforehand.)

c. Wa bið þam þe sceal

of langope leofes abidan. (WfL 52b-53)

(Woe to the one who has to wait in longing for a loved one.)

d. Wa bið þam ðe sceal

þurh sliðne nið sawle bescufan

in fyres fæþm, frofre ne wenan,

wihte gewendan. (Bwf 183b-86a)

(Woe to the one who through persistent enmity has to thrust his soul into the embrace of the fire, without expectation of consolation or anything changing.)

[e. Wa bið ðonne ðissum modgum monnum, ðam ðe her nu mid

mane lengest

lifiað on ðisse lænan gesceaft. (SnS 327-28a)]

(Woe then to these proud people who live longest here and now in this transient world in criminal ways.)

[f. Wa þe nu, þu þe þeowast þissere worulde,

and her glæd leofast on galnysse

and þe mid stiðum astyrest sticelum þæs gælsan!

(JD2 178-80)]

(Woe to you, now, you who serve this world, and live here

cheerful in frivolity, and incite yourself in such wantonness
with strong goads.)

- g. wa him þære mirigðe,

þonne he ða handlean hafað and sceawað,

bute he þæs yfeles ær geswyce. (Pra 13b-15)

(Woe to him for that pleasure when he possesses and sees his reward, unless he desists from that evil earlier.)

Set 2

- a. Ðam bið hæleða well

pe para blissa brucan moton. (And 885b-86)

(It is well with those heroes who can enjoy those pleasures.)

- b. [...] wel is þam ðe þæt wyrcaþ mote.

(XSt 364)

(... it is well with the one who can do that [i.e. obey God])

- c. Wel is þam þe motun

on þa grimman tíð góðe lícian. (Chr 1079b-80)

(It is well with those who are able to please God in that dreadful time.)

- d. Wel bip bam be mot

in þa geomran tid gode lician. (Phx 516b-17)

(It is well with the one who is able to please God in that sorrowful time.)

- e. Wel bið þam þe him are seceð

frofre to fæder on heofenum. þær us eal seo fæstnung stondeð.

(Wan 114b-15)

(It is well with the one who seeks mercy, the consolation of the Father in heaven, where for us all security remains.)

- f. Wel bið þam eorle þe him on innan hafað,
reþehydig wer, rume heortan. (Alm 1-2)

(It is well with the noble person, the zealous man, who has within himself a great heart.)

- g. wel bið þam þe mot
æfter deaðdæge drihten secean
ond to fæder fæþmum freoðo wilnian.

(Bwf 186b-88)

(It is well with the one who can seek the Lord after his day of death, and ask for protection in the embrace of the Father.)

- h. Wel bið ðam þe wyrcoð willan þinne!
(LP2 17)

(It is well with one who does your will.)

- i. wel hym þæs geweorkes,
ðonne he ða handlean hafað and sceawað,
gyf he ealteawne ende gedreogeð. (Pra 18b-20)

(It is well for him because of that action when he possesses and sees his reward, if he endures a good end.)

The reason for considering these sets together is that the formulas are

antithetically opposed in Beowulf and A Prayer (1d. and 1g., 2g. and 2i.). Other related forms show a similar tendency towards antithetical structure (see sets 3 and 4 below), and lines 11-20 of A Prayer depend entirely on these forms to express the marked contrast between the fate of those who behave in a Christian fashion and those who do not. The theme of the two sets is, with one exception, quite clear. They deal with spiritual well-being or its opposite, in a Christian sense. Most of the expressions are explicitly eschatological in force or occur in an eschatological context. The obvious exception is 1c., from The Wife's Lament, which is apparently an entirely secular poem, unusual in that it has no overt Christian reference at all. The defining formula of the expression, 'Wa bið þam þe sceal [...]', is the same as that in the Beowulf example, suggesting that the poet was at least drawing on the same resources as the Beowulf poet.

The form has, moreover, a function in the overall construction of the poems. All but three of the examples which are maxims (1e., 2b. and 2f.) begin in the b-verse. Two of these begin new sections of verse: the poem Alms-Giving begins with the form; and it opens one of Solomon's speeches in Solomon and Saturn.⁷ The remainder of the examples, with the exception of numbers 1a. and 2a., end verse sections marked off in the text. The complete manuscript of A Prayer, Cotton Julius A.ii. has 'coloured large capitals'⁸ to indicate divisions after number 1g., at line 16; and after 2i., at line 21 (among others). The Lord's Prayer II, line 17 (2h.), also comes at the end of a section of the poem which expands the phrase 'qui es in celis'. The

Beowulf forms function as an antithetical unit, so I consider them both as ending the verse section.

The exceptions to the rule that these expressions mark sectional divisions in the poems, 1a. and 2a., are notable for the fact that they eschew the traditional syntax by making wa or wel the second stressed element in the half-line, not the headword. In Chapter 1, I noted examples from the Heliand and the Old Saxon Genesis where uuel and uuê occur at the end of the line, so this most likely explains the Genesis B example. Andreas has an antithetical unit, ‘þæm bið wræcsið witod’ (wretchedness is appointed for them, 889a), parallel in syntax and opposite in meaning to ‘Ðam bið hæleða well’, and it may be that the poet wished to draw on the eschatological theme but was deliberately avoiding a closing formula.

These two sets, then, are remarkably consistent. In Riedinger’s terms, the theme is the beatitude or woe which is the present or future result of different kinds of behaviour; and the structural function is to round off or commence a section of verse emphatically. This observation concerning the structural function of the maxims serves to reinforce the general point that fitt divisions are usually the work of poets rather than scribes, and that such divisions are an integral part of poetic structure which should be indicated in texts.⁹

Though it is obvious that these maxims are primarily eschatological,

some further comment is appropriate on the content and context of at least some of them. The similarity of 2c. and 2d. has already been noted, but the similarity of 2e. from The Wanderer and 2g. from Beowulf, is also quite marked, particularly the concepts of God as Father, whose protection or help is to be sought. Cynewulf uses similar expressions in a homiletic formula at the end of the tenth fitt of Christ:

utan us to fæder freoþa wilnian
 biddan bearn godes ond þone bliðan gæst
 þæt he us gescilde wið sceapan wæpnum,
 laþra lygesearwum, se us lif forgeaf,
 leomu, lic ond gæst. Si him lof symle
 þurh woruld worulda, wuldor on heofnum.

(773-78)

(Let us ask the Father for protection, entreat God's Son and the kind Spirit that he who gave us limbs, life and spirit, shield us against the weapons of enemies, the deceitful wiles of hateful ones. To him be glory in the heavens, world without end.)

In The Wanderer, the poem is framed by the extended envelope pattern of reference to God's mercy, first experienced by the lonely man, then sought by the one who begins to see beyond his suffering to the spiritual nature of things. His security is to be found in God, not in possessions or friends or martial prowess. For Cynewulf, God's protection is to be sought against the devices of the devil, and he expresses the thought in the homiletic 'utan us' (let us) formula, with a Trinitarian reference and a doxology. Though it has

few of the particular associations of these two passages. the Beowulf wa / wel antithesis unquestionably derives from the same thought world.

The similarity of line 13b of A Prayer, 1g. and Riddle 11 8b, 1b., was noted by Dobbie. Together with the applied maxim from Judgment Day II, 1f., these three warn against improper enjoyment, levity and drunkenness. The riddle and prayer share a repentance or restoration formula also found in laws, charters and homilies. The emphasis in the laws and charters is on restitution as evidence of a change of heart, hence the use of verbs like gebetan (make amends for) and gecyrran (turn from).¹⁰ The homilies of Wulfstan, for example, often combine geswican (desist from) and (ge)betan, the two most important aspects of the medieval doctrine of penance (e.g. Bethurum VI, p. 148 line 90, VII, p. 163 line 136). Like the homilies and charters, the maxims emphasise the judgement context, though in nothing like the graphic detail that the former genres employ.

Though the detail is not there in the Prayer, the judgement context may provide some explanation for the peculiar expression the poem repeats, 'þonne he þa handlean hafað ond sceawað' (when he possesses and sees his reward, lines 14 and 19). The poem is not notable for its originality and variety. Lines 11-20 are made up entirely of variants on the maxim formulas that are the subject of this chapter, and the whole poem is a tissue of commonplaces and repetitions. Hence this expression habban and sceawian could be dismissed as a line-filler. It is however interesting to note that the

only other example of the formula in verse is found in The Metrical Preface to Wærferth's Translation of Gregory's Dialogues:

Bideþ þe se bisceop, se þe ðas boc begeat
 þe þu on þinum handum nu hafast and sceawast,
 þæt þu him to þeossum halgum helpe bidde.

(16-18)

(The bishop who provided this book that you have in your hands and are looking at now, asks that you pray on his behalf to these saints for help.)

Similarly, the only other use in Old English verse of the word ealteawe (perfect, good) in Prayer line 20, is in the Preface, line 9, æltowe; otherwise the word is common in the Ælfredian prose translations. This suggests that the Sitze im Leben of the two poems might be similar. If that is so, the Prayer may simply be sharing the liking for doublets of the Mercian translators.¹¹ But whereas the holding in the hands and reading of a book warrants an expression like habban and sceawian, this does not so readily apply to the recompense of an individual in the afterlife. But there is in the Ælfredian works a concept that may explain the formula in A Prayer, and that is the notion of the wicked and the righteous, the saved and the damned, being mutually visible from their very different positions in the eschatological topography. The origin of the idea is the parable of Dives and Lazarus in Luke 16, taken further by Gregory the Great in his popular Fortieth Homily on the Gospels. It appears in the Old English version of the Dialogues thus:

hi [sc. unrihtwisan men] byrnað to þon hwæthwugu, þæt þa

rihtwisan ealle geseon in Gode þa gefean, þe hi onfengon, 7
 eac sceawian on þam arleasum þa witu. þe hi him sylfum
 beburgon.¹²

(they [the unrighteous] burn that bit more in that the righteous
 see in God all the joys that they have received, and also look
 on the torments of the wicked, that they have saved themselves
 from.)

The verb sceawian is actually used by Wærferð, and thus this formula and the judgement context in the Prayer lead us to one of the more peculiar topoi of medieval eschatology.

All the expressions comprising these two sets deal with the same theme of pleasing and obeying God, and being blessed, or bearing the consequences of doing otherwise: all except 1c., from The Wife's Lament. The maxim is a fully-integrated and fitting conclusion to the poem with its emphasis on longing (longaþ etc.) and the dreariness it imparts to the human psyche. At the literal level, the maxim plays its part in the effective depiction of the state of mind of the woman. However, Michael Swanton has suggested that The Husband's Message and The Wife's Lament may be allegorical, a view of the former which is supported for different reasons by Margaret Goldsmith.¹³ Swanton does not consider the implications of this maxim formula in any detail, but its conformity to the pattern of style and function that has been observed above, might support a reading which is not allegorical, but is not only literal. This maxim at the end might be seen as an invitation to the

thoughtful listener or reader to explore the possibilities of spiritual reading: the female persona might be a well-known character of legend, but she might also be seo sawol or seo cirice, waiting for the eschatological return of her lover and husband.¹⁴

Another two sets bear comparison, though they are very different in their attestation. Set 3 consists of the formulas with the headword or stressed element eadig, set 4 those with earm(ing). Expressions with the two headwords are linked together only in Maxims I and A Prayer. The majority of set 3 consists of the Metrical Psalms, so I have grouped these as one, and listed the others separately. Once again, I have included applied maxims in square brackets for completeness.

Set 3

- a. He weorðeð eadig, se þe hine ece god
 cystum geceoseð and hine clæne hafað,
 and on his earduncgstowum eardað syððan.

(P64. 4)

(Beatus quem elegisti et assumptisti! inhabitabit in atriis tuis.)

Eadige weorðað, þa þe eardiað
on þinum husum, halig drihten. (P83. 4)

(Beati qui habitant in domo tua, Domine.)

Þæt byð eadig wer, se þe him oðerne
fultum ne seceð nymþe fælne god [...]

(P83. 5)

(Beatus vir cuius est auxilium abs te.)

þæt bið eadig mann, se þe him ecean godes
to mundbyrde miht gestreoneð. (P83. 12)

(Domine virtutum beatus homo qui sperat in te.)

þæt bið eadig folc
þe can naman ðinne neode herigean.

(P88. 13)

(Beatus populus qui scit jubilationem.)

[þæt bið eadig mann, þe þu hine, ece god,
on þinre soðre æ sylfa getyhtest.

(P93. 11)]

(Beatus homo quem tu erudieris, Domine, et de lege tua
docueris eum.)

Eadige beoð æghwær, þa ðe a willað
soðe domas sylfe efnan,
on ealle tid æghwæs healdan
heora soðfæstnysse symble mid dædum.

(P105. 3)

(Beati qui custodiunt iudicium, et faciunt iustitiam in omni
tempore.)

Eadig byð se wer se þe him ege drihtnes
on ferðcleofan fæste gestandeð,
and his beod healdeð bealde mid willan.

(P111. 1)

(Beatus vir qui timet Dominum, in mandatis ejus volet nimis.)

Eadige beoþ on wege, þa þe unwemme
on hiora dryhtnes æ deore gangað.

(P118. 1)

(Beati immaculati in via; qui ambulant in lege Domini.)

Eadige beoð swylce, þa þe a wyllað
his gewitnesse wise smeagan,
and hine mid ealle innancundum

heortan hordcofan helpe biddað. (P118. 2)

(Beati qui scrutantur testimonia ejus, in toto corde exquirunt eum.)

Eadige syndon ealle þe him ecne god
drihten ondrædað, and his gedefne weg
on hyra lifes tid lustum gangað. (P127. 1)

(Beati omnes qui timent Dominum, qui ambulant in viis ejus.)

Eadig byð se þe nimeð ond eac seteð
his agen bearn on þone æþelan stan.

(P136. 9)

(Beatus qui tenebit, et allidet parvulos tuos ad petram.)

Eadig bið þæt folc, oðre hatað,
þe him swa on foldan fægre limpeð;
eadig bið þæt folc þe ælmihtig wile
drihten god dema weorðan. (P143. 19)

b. Forþon se bið eadig se ðe æfre wile
man oferhycgen meotode cweman
synne adwæscan. (

c. Eadig biþ se þe eapmod leofaþ; cymeþ him seo ar of
heofonum. (Sfr 107)

d. Eadig bið se þe in his eple gepihð. (Mx1 37a)

e. Se byð eadig, se þe on eorðan her
 dæiges and nyhtes drihtne hyræð
 and a hys willan wyrcð. (Pra 16-18a)

Set 4

a. Earm bið se þe wile
firenum gewyrcean, þæt he fah scyle
from his scyppende ascyred weorðan
æt domdæge to deaðe niþer. (Chr 1615b-18)

(Wretched is the one who wishes to practise wickedness, so that he must be separated from his Creator on the Day of Judgement, [go] down to death.)

b. earm se him his frynd geswicað.

(Mx1 37b)

(Wretched is the one who is deserted by his friends.)

c. Earm biþ se þe sceal ana lifgan. (Mx1 172)

(Wretched is the one who has to live alone.)

d. Se byð earming þe on eorðan her

dæiges and nihtes deofle campað

and hys willan wyrcað. (Pra 11-13a)

(He is a wretch who day and night here on earth fights for the devil and does his will.)

These two sets need relatively little commentary, beyond what is given below on the sources. The collocation of earm and eadig is common enough in poetry and homily (Chr 1496, 1553a, JD2 163a and the parallel in Napier XXIX, p. 138 14-16,¹⁵ Run 76a, MCh2 40a). In the expressions that do not derive from the Psalms there is, as in sets 1 and 2, an emphasis on Christian behaviour (or the lack of it) and the consequences in eschatological terms. The Psalms lack the eschatological dimension, as do the passages from Maxims I, and for the same reason: they derive from the Old Testament (see below). Nevertheless, the theme of God's favour resulting in blessedness for the good person, which runs through the Psalms, led to the translator giving

a delicate non-translation of the imprecatory part of Psalm 136.¹⁶

The next set of maxims also has a consistent theme: folly which results in death.

Set 5

- a. Dol biþ se þe him his dryhten ne ondrædeþ: cymeð him se
deað unþinged. (Sfr 106)

(Foolish is the one who does not fear his Lord: unexpected death comes to such.)

- b. Dol biþ se þe his dryhten nat, to þæs oft cymeð deað unþinged.
(Mx1 35)

(Foolish is the one who does not know his Lord, often unexpected death comes to such.)

- c. Dol him ne ondrædeð ða deaðsperu,
swylteð hwæpre, gif him soð meotud
on geryhtu þurh regn ufan
of gestune læteð stræle fleogan,
færende flan. (R3 53-57a)

(Foolish is the one who does not fear the deadly spear; he dies nevertheless if the true Lord releases a missile to fly directly through the rain from the clamour above, a terrifying dart.)

- d. Dol bið se ðe gæð on deop wæter
[...] huru se godes cunnað

full dyslice, dryhtnes meahta. (SnS 225-29)

(Foolish is the one who goes into deep water: ... indeed, he foolishly tests God, the powers of the Lord.)

The similarity of 5a. and 5b. has already been observed, and the regular occurrence of the formula in the a-verse reinforces the sense that it had a particular metrical function. Interesting here is the fact that the folly always has some relation to God, whether it is ignorance, failure to fear him, or putting him to the test. And since the result may be death, this set becomes an extension of the eschatological theme present in the previous sets.

The remaining set is a group of maxims with various headwords.

Set 6

a. Wis bið se þe con

ongytan þone geocend, þe us eall good syleð

þe we habbað þenden we her beoð.

(Aza 87b-89)

(Wise is the one who is able to discern the Saviour who gives us all the good things that we possess while we are here.)

b. Til biþ se þe his treowe gehealdeþ. (Wan 112a)

(Good is the one who keeps his faith.)

c. Gifre biþ se þam golde onfehð [...]

(Mx1 69a)

(Avid is the one who receives the gold ...)

- d. Seoc se biþ þe to seldan ieteð. (Mx1 111a)

(The one who eats too seldom is sick.)

- e. Bald bið se ðe onbyregeð boca cræftes.

(SnS 243)

(The one who gets a taste for the power of books is confident.)

- f. Unlæde bið and ormod se ðe a wile

geomrian on gihðe; se bið gode fracoðast.

(SnS 351-52)

(The one who wishes to keep on mourning in his grief is
wretched and spineless: he is most hateful to God.)

6a. is an intriguing addition to the Song of Azarias, prompted apparently by ‘Benedicite, omnes spiritus Dei Domino’, Daniel 3. 65, and goes on to remind the reader that God promises more good things after the separation of the soul from the body. Thus, once again, an eschatological context is found for this particular formula; but the others have no obvious eschatological significance.

There are in excess of forty examples of the variants of this formula. The majority show a preoccupation with death, judgement, heaven and hell, and consequently are underpinned by a Christian theology. Momma writes,

Since the structure of the formula unmistakably resembles the Beatitudes, it might be named the ‘Beatitude formula’. In Old

English prose translations and glosses, the Latin Beatitudes are often rendered into forms very similar to the gnostic formula: for example, gebletsod sy se ðe com on drihtnes naman (Luke [CCCC 140] [...] 13:35 [...]); eadge biðon ða ðe oehtnisse hea geðolas fore soðfæstnisse [...] (The Lindisfarne Gospels Mt 5:10 [...]). It is very tempting to assume that the formula ultimately came from Latin (in which case the formula is Christian in origin); on the other hand, the vernacular origin of the formula cannot be entirely rejected since the formula often appears in poems not particularly religious, such as Beowulf, The Wanderer, and The Wife's Lament. (pp. 424-25, note 8)

The argument here for a vernacular origin of the formula is only the very feeblest, and the question of sources and analogues needs to be given further consideration.

SOURCES

The starting-point for a consideration of sources might well be the Metrical Psalms, since every occurrence of the blessing formula in Psalms 50-150 where beatus and beati are used, is translated in the Old English version by eadig(e). The Old English Psalms follow the source closely, translating vir as wer, homo as mann, populus as folc, and supplying the verb which the Latin texts lack. There is no real question of the direct relation between any of these terms, especially eadig and beatus, as far as the translator was concerned. But it is quite clear that there is no such direct relationship

between the beatitude formula and the Old English formula ‘eadig bið se þe [...]’. The poet uses other syntactic arrangements (‘þæt byð eadig [...]’), an alternative verb like weorðan (to become), and the only time he uses the actual formula verbatim is when in Psalm 136 he diverts considerably from his source. And in set 2, the Wel formula of Alms-Giving has been seen as a version of Psalm 40. 2, ‘Beatus qui intelligit super egenum et pauperem’,¹⁷ which explains the non-eschatological character of the formula, and indicates the availability of different ways of expressing biblical formulas in Old English ones.

For some of the other eadig / earm expressions there are biblical sources: below, in Chapter 7, I suggest that 4c. derives from Ecclesiastes 4. 10, ‘Vae soli’. The other Maxims examples (3d. and 4c.), the antithetical pair, are probably a version of Proverbs 19. 4, ‘Divitiae addunt amicos plurimos; a paupere autem et hi quos habuit separantur’. Here the poet exploits the ambiguity of the Old English word eadig: in the Psalms it mostly refers to spiritual prosperity and blessing, here, it has the sense of temporal prosperity. The ‘Dol biþ’ and ‘Eadig bið’ lines from The Seafarer (106-107) follow each other and also make an antithetical pair, drawing on a proverb ultimately deriving from the Septuagint version of Proverbs 3. 34, recorded in I Peter 5. 5 and James 4. 6 as ‘Deus superbis resistit, humilibus autem dat gratiam’. This provides some motivation for the variation between the versions of The Seafarer and the Maxims in the dol formula: for the poet of The Seafarer the problem is not ignorance (nat), but the pride which has no

fear (ne ondrædeþ) of God. These examples of the eadig formula, though they derive from biblical sources, weaken the direct association of eadig and beatus made by the Psalm translator; and not only by him, but also by the glossators and translators of the Gospels. It is remarkable that no extant example of the eadig formula in poetry can be traced to the quintessential beatitudes of Matthew 5 and Luke 6.

Klaeber observed of the wa / wel passage in Beowulf, ‘Latin influence, it may be briefly mentioned, is perceptible in the figure[...] of antithesis, 183 ff. [...]’ (p. lxviii). Certainly there is a patterning of beatitudes and woes in Luke 6 (beatus—vae), blessings and cursings in Deuteronomy 28 and Jeremiah 17 (benedictus—maledictus). But none of these provide anything but the loosest of analogies for the Beowulf passage, and of course the argument itself is flawed. It is because of their eschatological content that these formulas show Latin influence, not their antithetical structure. The antithetical series in A Prayer (1g., 2i., 3e. and 4d.), lines 11-20, might be loosely modelled on Isaiah 3. 9-11:

[...] Vae animae eorum, quoniam reddita sunt eis mala.

Dicite justo quoniam bene, quoniam fructum adinventionum
suarum commedet.

Vae impio in malum: retributio enim manuum ejus fiet ei.

If this is the case, the Old English verse greatly magnifies and sharpens the oppositions by repetition and the antithetical pairing of earming and eadig, wa and wel. The Latin phrase manuum ejus might further explain the Old

English word handlean (reward in the hand) in the Prayer, and the rather concrete notion of the recompense both blessed and wretched receive in that poem.

But despite both the etymological link between vae and wa, and the fact that the Gospel translators, followed by Wulfstan ('Vae pregnantibus' in Mark 13. 17, for example, becomes 'Wa ðam wifum þe þonne tymeð', Bethurum V, p. 134 lines 5 and 12-13), regularly correlate the words, there is again a remarkable gap in the extant poems where we might expect wa formulas to translate the many biblical woe oracles. Wulfstan seems to have been particularly fond of the woes, selecting those from Isaiah and Jeremiah for translation and comment (Bethurum XI), perhaps 'because they offered him both a subject in which he was interested and an opportunity for an exercise in rhythmical composition' (p. 332), rather than as a complete homily in themselves. When Wulfstan warms to the eschatological theme in his homilies, however, he uses vernacular versions of the formula, 'Wa þam þe þær sceal wunian on wite' (amongst others) to refer to the woes of the damned in several different homilies (Bethurum III, p. 126 lines 68-69, VII, p. 162 line 124, XII, p. 224 lines 87-88). The Blickling homilist also uses the formula:

Wa biþ þonne þæm mannum þe ne ongytaþ þisse worlde
 yrmþa, þe he to gesceapene beoþ, & hie nellaþ gemunan þone
 dæg heora forþfore, ne þone bifgendan domes dæg, ne hie
 gelyfaþ on þæt ece wuldor þæs heofenlican rices.

(Morris, p. 61)

(Woe to those men, then, who do not understand the miseries of this world to which they are destined, and have no wish to remember the the day of their death, nor the terrible Day of Judgement, nor believe in the eternal glory of the heavenly kingdom.)

The patterns established by the overall use of these formulas in poetry give no real support to the notion that they derive from Latin. The anomalous ones in set 6 show the co-existence of a non-eschatological tradition with the eschatological. Taken with the examples given in Chapter 1 from the Old Saxon Genesis and Heliand, and from Muspilli, some of which are eschatological, some not, but for none of which there are direct Latin sources, the evidence suggests that the formulas are vernacular in origin, but that they quickly adapted to express particularly the alternatives of a Christian eschatological world view.

BACK TO BEOWULF

Dorothy Whitelock demonstrated the full integration of Christianity in the poem.¹⁸ But she, and others, remained puzzled at the lack of clear New Testament doctrines in the poem. Patrick Wormald writes:

The poet possesses, and assumes, a considerable knowledge of the obscure corner of Genesis describing the descent of the giants and monsters from Cain and their destruction by the

flood. After the flood we hear no more: no Moses, no Isaiah, no Christ, no Paul. Clark Hall's famous remark that there was little in the poem to offend a 'pious Jew' has often been quoted [...]. It seems almost as though there were a conscious avoidance of New Testament doctrines, like redemption. Any positive impact that the biblical references might otherwise have is therefore diminished by their limited range.

(p. 40)¹⁹

Fred C. Robinson explains this by extending his notion of the 'appositive style' to Christian references: when the characters speak they do so from a 'Noachian' point of view; whereas the poet can express more obvious Christian truths, or at least expect his vocabulary to be understood as carrying fully Christian meaning.²⁰ This is an acute observation and gives a rationale for the apparent lack of New Testament doctrine (p. 43). But others still see lines 175-88, or more particularly lines 179-83, as the most difficult passage in the poem, and most likely to be an interpolation. Thomas D. Hill, for example, argues specifically against Robinson that 'the discrepancy between the poem as a whole and the condemnation of the Danes' idol worship is absolute' and the result either of a slip on the part of the poet, 'or someone else added that passage to the poem' (p. 69).²¹ He concludes, 'this condemnation of the idol worship of the Danes [...] can be dealt with by the simple assumption that the text of Beowulf is corrupt at this point' (p. 69).

The maxims which conclude the passage in question are replete with

New Testament doctrine. The grim play on the word fæþm, for example, which contrasts the embrace of the Father with the embrace of the fire. Whatever its ambiguity in a non-Christian context, the Fatherhood of God in a personal Christian sense is a New Testament concept. In the Old Testament God is Father-by-creation of the nation of Israel (Jeremiah 31. 9). This develops more personally in the intertestamental literature (Ecclesiasticus 23. 1, 4). The embrace of the Father enjoyed by the souls of the blessed is an extension of the intimacy enjoyed by Christ himself, 'qui est in sinu patris', John 1. 17—this is the only reference to the embrace of the Father in the New Testament. The embrace of the fire is likewise New Testamental.²² It does not exist in the Old Testament, but the apocalyptic literature of the intertestamental period, Judith 16. 21 and II Esdras 7. 36, for example, develops the idea of punishment by fire. In Matthew 25. 41 and elsewhere, the fire is eternal, hence the hopelessness and changelessness of those who suffer it. The stark contrast between the two states is characteristic of the New Testament: the popular notion of hell as alternately hot and cold, perhaps deriving ultimately from the Visio Pauli,²³ and consistent with the dread of cold in Germanic culture generally, finds no place here. Neither is there any apparent knowledge of purgatory (Caie p. 77), which other poets like Dante used as a way of preserving some of those who did not know the gospel from the full rigours of eternal damnation.

With these maxims, the Beowulf poet brings to a close the part of the poem which sets the scene of the action. Within the three introductory fitts

the poet has established a sympathetic view of the characters, but he has also acknowledged their ignorance of God. He condemns their idolatry and goes on to generalise from their situation to the contemporary one in explicit New Testament terms in the wa / wel maxims. It is this explicit condemnation of the Danes in one place, alongside the consistent sympathy of the rest of the poem, that has given rise to critical disquiet, and parallels have been sought particularly in Celtic literature for the 'pagan sympathy'.²⁴ Anthony Faulkes's essay with that title examines the phenomenon in Snorri Sturluson's Prose Edda.²⁵ The main criticism I have of these explorations of how Christians regarded their recent pagan ancestors is that they do not give sufficient attention to the locus classicus on the salvation of the good pagan, the first two chapters of St Paul's Epistle to the Romans: Faulkes mentions Romans 1. 20 as part of the argument for natural revelation (p. 291), Robinson puts it in a footnote (p. 93, n. 31), and the Dronkes do not use the passage at all. I cannot comment here on Snorri, yet Romans does seem to hold out the hope that there will be a favourable judgement for the righteous heathen whose consciences, like Beowulf's (in some respects at least, 2736b-43a), are clear, Romans 2. 14-16.

There are a great many simple parallels between the Beowulf prologue (the introduction, and manuscript fitts I and II) and Romans 1 and 2. Romans 1. 19-20 speaks of God revealing himself through created things:

Invisibilia enim ipsius, a creatura mundi, per ea quae facta sunt, intellecta, conspiciuntur; sempiterna quoque ejus virtus,

et divinitas.

And in Beowulf, the scop sings a song of creation, 90b-98:

Sægde se þe cuþe
frumsceaft fira feorran reccan,
cwæð þæt se ælmihtiga eorðan worh[te].

(90b-92)

(He who knew how to tell it, told of the creation of people
from far back, said that the Almighty created the earth.)

In Romans, knowledge of God was lost, and people turned to worship idols,
1. 21, 23, 25:

Quia, cum cognovissent Deum, non sicut Deum glorificaverunt,
aut gratias egerunt; sed evanuerunt in cogitationibus suis [...].
Et mutaverunt gloriam incorruptibilis Dei, in similitudinem
imaginis corruptibilis hominis, et volucrum, et quadrupedum,
et serpentium.

The Danes in their extremity turned to idol worship and lost knowledge of
God (ne cuþon, ne wiston, ne cuþon) 180-183a. To the heathen in Romans,
idolatry seems like wisdom, 1. 22, ‘dicentes enim se esse sapientes, stulti facti
sunt’; to the Danes, idolatry is both ræd (counsel) and hyht (hope), 171b-79a.
After his discourse the apostle directs his attention to his audience and warns
them that they who pass judgement on the heathen are without excuse, and
will be judged themselves 2. 1-11:

Propter quod inexcusabilis es, o homo omnis, qui iudicas; in
quo enim iudicas alterum, teipsum condemnas, eadem enim

agis quae iudicas. [...]

Secundum autem duritiam tuam, et impenitens cor, thesaurizas

tibi iram in die irae, et revelationis iusti iudicii Dei,

Qui reddet unicuique secundum opera eius,

Iis quidem, qui secundum patientiam boni operis, gloriam, et

honorem, et incorruptionem quaerunt, vitam aeternam;

Iis autem, qui sunt ex contentione, et qui non acquiescunt

veritati, credunt autem iniquitati, ira et indignatio.

Tribulatio et angustia in omnem animam hominis operantis

malum [...];

Gloria autem, et honor, et pax omni operanti bonum.

The Beowulf poet also turns to his audience and generalises, 183b-88, warning them of the future. He knows, and his audience know, the truth which the Danes did not—it is well for the one who is able to (mot) seek the embrace of the Father, and terrible for the one who has to (sceal) go to hell. In Romans, there is a contrast between those who do good and those who do not, and their respective fates, eternal life and wrath, 2. 5-11; the same typology underlies the maxims in Beowulf. Those in Romans who are ex contentione are subject to wrath, 2. 8; in Beowulf, the damned thrust their souls into the fire through persistent enmity ('purh sliðne nið' 184a). Those in Romans who seek (quaerunt) glory find it, and those who seek (secean) the peace of the Father's embrace, find it.

There are differences between the Romans passage and Beowulf, but

they are such as might rather confirm the paradigmatic relationship than otherwise. In Romans the first step towards depravity is failure to give thanks to God, 1. 21, 'cum cognovissent Deum, non sicut Deum glorificaverunt, aut gratias egerunt', whereas in Beowulf, the characters consistently give thanks to God, as Klaeber (p. xlix) and many others observe. In Romans 1. 26-32, Paul lists the particularly sexual sins committed by those who lost the knowledge of God, whereas in Beowulf the Danes fall only into idolatry. The rationale behind these two differences is the same: the poet wishes to maintain the sympathy of the audience for the characters, wishes to portray them as good in their own terms, even to suggest that by doing what God requires without direct knowledge of him, they are a law to themselves and have the law written on their hearts, Romans 2. 14-15:

Cum enim gentes, quae legem non habent, naturaliter ea quae legis sunt faciunt, ejusmodi legem non habentes, ipsi sibi sunt lex;

Qui ostendunt opus legis scriptum in cordibus suis, testimonium reddente illis conscientia ipsorum, et inter se invicem cogitationibus accusantibus, aut etiam defendentibus.

Moreover, the poet was well aware that the sexual proclivities of the ancient Orient and Mediterranean were not those of the Dark Age north, and to transfer that detail from the biblical account to his poem would be introducing a red herring.

The Romans parallel makes sense of the Beowulf passage in various

ways. The phrase ‘*þurh sliðne nið*’, 184a, has been translated ‘through fierce hostility’, which Klaeber took issue with, suggesting ‘in dire distressful wise’ (p. 136). Bradley translates ‘because of cruel affliction’.²⁶ Klaeber’s translation nearly contradicts the vigorous verb *bescufan*, ‘thrust’; Bradley’s is a *non sequitur*—how does cruel affliction impel a person to thrust their soul into the fire? Brodeur suggested that ‘it was the cruel ravages of Grendel which imperiled both the bodies and souls of the Danes’, but that hardly answers the objection.²⁷ My translation, ‘through persistent enmity or hostility’, picks up the theme of idolatry and ignorance of God in the lines preceding, and implies ‘through enmity against God in idolatry’. It thus contrasts with those who seek refuge in God in lines 186b-88, and incidentally with the general picture of the Danes throughout the poem as people of good will. Independent of the Romans context, I think this makes better sense of the lines; but the biblical reference to the contentious receiving anguish, and the good receiving peace, Romans 2. 8-10, adds to the point.

Read through the filter of the Romans passage, the condemnation of the idolatry of the Danes is not discrepant, nor extraneous, as Hill would have it. It fits with incidental details of the first three fitts of the poem, and gives some purpose to Beowulf’s self-exculpation towards the end of the poem. The condemnatory lines are necessary, for no Christian would imagine idolatry to be acceptable; but also ambiguous, because the same Danes who practise idolatry are otherwise portrayed as wise and good. The combination of condemnation and ambiguity is apparent in Romans, and the same demand that

Christians beware for themselves.

As has been seen, the wa / wel formulas are emphatically conclusive in both content and structural use. The Beowulf poet has put on record the idolatry of the Danes, unambiguously condemned it, and also has warned his audience of the penalty attached to persistence in it. The formulas have briefly set out the eschatological alternatives that are found in Romans and throughout medieval Christian doctrine. The poet thus sets out his credentials as a Christian. But the use of these particular formulas also implies that that topic is finished, there is nothing more to say on the matter, and the poet can move on to the action of the story. He can move on from the immutable eschatological world where there is no hope of change ('frofre ne wenan / wihte gewendan' 185b-86a), to contingent circumstances which can change even if hope has flagged ('ne mihte snotor hæleð / wean onwendan', the wise hero [Hroðgar] could not change his suffering, 190b-91a).

SUMMARY

Despite the variety of metrical shapes in which they are found, the sets of formulas which have been examined in this chapter are remarkably homogeneous. While there is evidence that the form is vernacular in origin, and not calqued on Latin, it was nevertheless most often used to convey Christian, and specifically eschatological, doctrine. The wa / wel types moreover took on a structural function, that of beginning or concluding a section or poem in emphatic style. When the general evidence is applied to

the particular instances of the formulas in Beowulf, it becomes clear that the poet's use of the formulas was motivated by three purposes: one, to acknowledge and condemn the idolatry of the Danes; two, to generalise from that to a statement of Christian biblical belief about judgement, applicable to both the Danes and his audience; and three, to make an emphatic closure to that particular incident and its implications.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 4

1. The Old English Elegies: A Critical Edition and Genre Study (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992).
2. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967).
3. 'The "Gnostic Formula" and Some Additions to Bliss's Metrical System', NQ, 234 (1989), 423-26.
4. A. J. Bliss, The Metre of Beowulf (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967), §§ 86, 110-11, pp. 77-78, 96-97.
5. John Collins Pope, The Rhythm of Beowulf: An Interpretation of the Normal and Hypermetric Verse-Forms in Old English Poetry, rev. edn (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), p. 371. Pope's footnote says 'there is no such possibility' against these forms as Type E, and refers the reader to his 1966 Preface, p. xxxi, where I can find nothing germane.
6. Donald K. Fry, 'Old English Formulas and Systems', English Studies, 48 (1967), 193-204, argues that a system is 'a group of half-lines [...] related in form by the identical relative placement of two elements, one a variable word [...] and the other constant word [...]' (p. 203). Riedinger's definition is slightly different (p. 305). I want to suggest that the criterion of 'identical relative placement' is unimportant in the particular case and that, for example, 'se bið eadig se þe [...]' is not a different system or formula from 'eadig bið se þe [...]', but basically the same one.

7. The scribe actually wrote 'Swa bið ðonne [...]', perhaps an indication that the form was unfamiliar in the a-verse.
8. Dobbie, ASPR VI, pp. lxxxv-lxxxvi: 'these sectional divisions correspond in general to the natural divisions of thought'.
9. Paul Cavill, 'Sectional Divisions in Old English Poetic Manuscripts', Neophilologus, 69 (1985), 156-59.
10. In the laws 'x scs. gebete' (a fine or penalty of x shillings [to make amends]) is ubiquitous. In the charters, Robertson XXXIII and XLIX end with a gebetan formula, XLII and XLVI with a gecyrran formula, but the formulas are so common they need no further illustration.
11. Dorothy Whitelock, 'The Prose of Alfred's Reign', in Continuations and Beginnings, remarks that the Mercian translators have 'so strong a liking for rendering a single Latin word by a pair of synonyms that [...] it is [...] a marked and somewhat monotonous stylistic feature' (p. 78).
12. Bischofs Wærferth von Worcester Übersetzung der Dialoge Gregors des Grossen, ed. by Hans Hecht, Bibliothek der angelsächsischen Prosa, 5 (Leipzig: Wigand, 1900), p. 335. The fourth Dialogue concentrates almost exclusively on eschatology.
13. Michael J. Swanton, 'The Wife's Lament and The Husband's Message: A Reconsideration', Anglia, 82 (1964), 269-90, and Margaret E. Goldsmith, 'The Enigma of The Husband's Message', in Nicholson and Frese, pp. 242-63.
14. In The Harley Lyrics: The Middle English Lyrics of MS. Harley 2253, ed. by G. L. Brook, 4th edn (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1968), the lyric, The Way of Woman's Love, p. 72 line 14, has a secular

form parallel to this maxim: 'Wo is him þat loueþ þe loue þat he ne may ner ywynne.'

15. Wulfstan: Sammlung der ihm zugeschriebenen Homilien nebst Untersuchungen über ihre Echtheit, ed. by Arthur Napier (Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1883).

16. See further Paul Cavill, 'Two Sententious Generalisations'.

17. Joseph B. Trahern Jr., 'The Old English Almsgiving', NQ, 214 (1969), 46-47.

18. The Audience of Beowulf (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951; repr. 1967), pp. 1-19.

19. 'Bede, "Beowulf" and the Conversion of the Anglo-Saxon Aristocracy', in Bede and Anglo-Saxon England: Papers in Honour of the 1300th Anniversary of the Birth of Bede, ed. by Robert T. Farrell, British Archaeological Reports, 46 (Oxford: British Archaeological Reports, 1978), pp. 32-95.

20. Beowulf and the Appositive Style (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1985), pp. 29-59.

21. Thomas D. Hill, 'The Christian Language and Theme of Beowulf', in Companion to Old English Poetry, pp. 63-77.

22. Graham D. Caie, The Judgment Day Theme in Old English Poetry (Copenhagen: Nova, 1976), gives a full account of the development of the themes of 'Judgment and Apocalypse', pp. 73-94.

23. S. J. Crawford, 'The Cædmon Poems', Anglia, 49 (1925), 279-84, suggests this, p. 283.

24. Hill, pp. 72-76, and Charles Donahue, 'Beowulf, Ireland and the Natural Good', Traditio, 7 (1949-51), 263-77.
25. 'Pagan Sympathy: Attitudes to Heathendom in the Prologue to Snorra Edda', in Edda: A Collection of Essays, ed. by Robert J. Glendinning and Haraldur Bessason (Manitoba: University of Manitoba Press, 1983), pp. 283-314. Also, Ursula and Peter Dronke, 'The Prologue of the Prose Edda: Explorations of a Latin Background', in Sjötíu Ritgerðir helgaðar Jacobi Benediktssyni (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, 1977), pp. 153-76.
26. S. A. J. Bradley, Anglo-Saxon Poetry: An Anthology of Old English Poems in Prose Translation (London: Dent, 1982), p. 416.
27. Arthur Gilchrist Brodeur, The Art of Beowulf (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959), pp. 207-208.

CHAPTER 5

THE SOCIAL FUNCTION OF MAXIMS AND

THE BATTLE OF MALDON

Maxims, I have argued, are generalisations, traditional in form and expression. They are examples of what folklorists call ‘expressive folklore’; like proverbs, in that they are short, pithy and express a socially sanctioned view of life and its perplexities, but without the metaphorical dimension that is usual in post-Conquest proverbs.

MAXIM ENACTMENT AND THE SOCIAL FUNCTION OF MAXIMS

Early anthropologists avidly collected proverbs, folktales, riddles and superstitions in order to catalogue and categorise them. As E. Ojo Arewa and Alan Dundes complained,

most proverb collections consist of bare texts. Sometimes even the versions in the original language are absent. Often the meanings are not only unclear, but misrepresented inasmuch as the collector has succumbed to the worst kind of ethnocentrism, explaining a proverb in one culture by citation of a supposedly equivalent proverb from his own. This all-too-common tendency to translate a native culture’s folklore into the collector’s own makes most collections of proverbs of extremely limited value to serious students.

Arewa and Dundes then go on to examine Yoruba proverbs in the context of their use in the society: taking into account such matters as the relative status of the speaker and recipient, the relationship between the speakers (family or friends), the manner of speaking (serious or jocular), the purpose of the proverb enactment (reprimand, reminder of obligation, complaint). Several important studies of proverb performance in a social context followed, and others explored the related question of how the proverb works, of which Barley's paradigmatic analysis (see above, Chapter 3) was one, and Peter Seitel's another (see below). A very thorough review of these studies has been published by Carole R. Fontaine in the first part of her book, Traditional Sayings in the Old Testament.²

One of the limitations of these studies for my purposes is that they tend to focus on proverbs, especially on their metaphorical dimension. Maxims and proverbs overlap considerably in purpose and effect, but not in this particular. Scholarly consensus suggests that the basic aim of coining or repeating a saying, whether maxim or proverb, is to invoke a sense of order in a context where chaos threatens. Roger D. Abrahams observes, 'Expressive folklore embodies and reflects recurrent social conflicts', and 'because the performer of a proverb projects the conflict and resolves it, the illusion is created that it can be solved in real life' ('Rhetorical Theory', p. 148).³ And later,

Proverbs are traditional answers to recurrent ethical problems;
they provide an argument for a course of action which

conforms to community values. [...] The use of a proverb invokes an aura of moral rightness [...]; the comfort of past community procedure is made available to the present and future. [...] The strategy of the proverb, in other words, is to direct by appearing to clarify; this is engineered by simplifying the problem and resorting to traditional solutions.

(‘Rhetorical Theory’, p. 150)

Much of this is true of maxims, too. But the metaphorical nature of proverbs means that there is a cognitive leap necessary to apply them, a process of recognition and categorical transformation which applies the image to the given situation; this is lacking in maxims. The paradigmatic relationships may become clearer if we refer to Seitel’s diagram of proverb performance:⁴

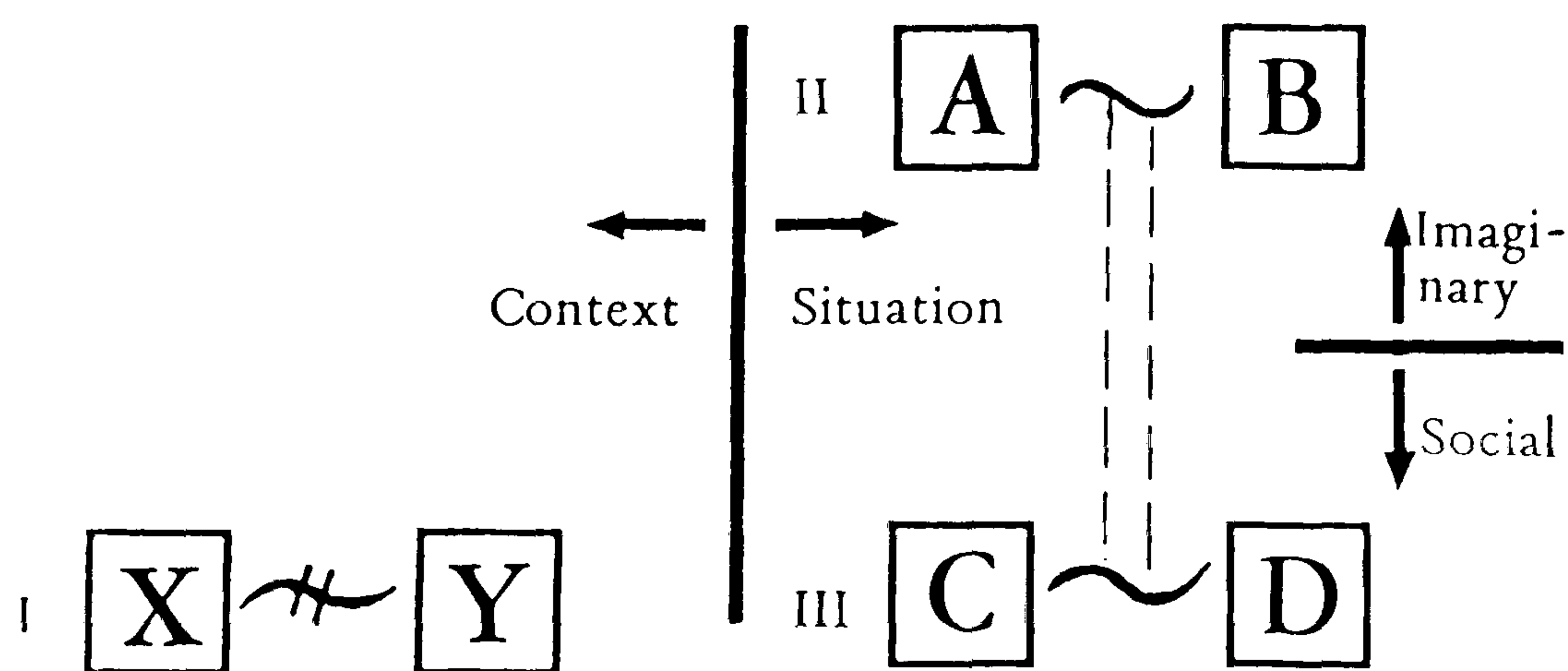


Fig. 1: Seitel's paradigm of proverb performance

Seitel comments:

X and Y are, respectively, the speaker and the intended hearer

of a proverb, and \sim represents the relationship which obtains between them—features of age, sex, status, etc. Part I of the diagram thus represents the social context of proverb use. Parts II and III represent, respectively, the proverb situation and the social situation to which the proverb is applied.

The symbol \sim refers to a relationship which is seen by the speaker as obtaining both between the objects (or people) in the social world (C and D) and between the concepts in the imaginary proverb situation (A and B). Because the diagram represents a logical structure, the symbol \sim represents a relationship of a logical nature which obtains between the substantive terms of the proverb situation ($A \sim B$) and also between the substantive terms of the social situation ($C \sim D$). This relationship may therefore be named by relational words such as ‘implies’—to characterize the relationship between the substantive terms ‘smoke’ and ‘fire’ in a usage of ‘where there’s smoke there’s fire.’ Another example is the relational word ‘equals’—to relate substantive terms in ‘a penny saved is a penny earned.’ The relational word may also name an action which is occurring or has occurred between the substantive terms such as ‘recognition’—a usage of ‘it is a wise parent who knows his own child.’ The symbol \sim can never stand for a substantive term.

The parallel dotted lines drawn between the relationship

symbols (—) in II and III represent the drawing of an analogy between the two relationships. Thus we may visualize that X says to Y that A is to B as C is to D (or $A:B :: C:D$). The terms ‘context’ versus ‘situation’ and ‘imaginary’ versus ‘social’ are added to aid both in visualizing the parts of the diagram to which these refer and in keeping them distinct from one another in subsequent usages.

To give an example of how the model represents the areas of investigation of proverb use: A father is discussing with his adolescent son the advisability of the son’s associating himself with a certain group of boys, one of whom has earned a very bad reputation. To his son’s argument that all of the rest of the members are reputable individuals, the father may answer, ‘If one finger brought oil it soiled the others.’ Here X and Y are the father and his son. The relationship between them (—) has dimensions of age, status, kin relationship. The context (I) may or may not be relevant—formal teaching session, informal discussion over a meal, etc. The proverb situation (II) is made up of the term ‘finger which brought oil’ (A) and the term ‘other fingers’ (B). The relationship between them is ‘soiling.’ The social situation described (III) is a boy of bad reputation (term C) bringing disrepute (the relationship —) to the other members of his group (term D). The fact that the relationship in the social situation is seen by the father as

somehow the 'same' (that is, 'spoiling' in both cases) is shown by the parallel dotted lines. (pp. 147-49)

Abrahams calls the cognitive leap which identifies the proverb terms (here, $A \sim B$) with the social situation ($C \sim D$) 'psychic distance', and further theorises as to its effect:

The controlling power of folklore, the carrying out of its rhetorical intent, resides in the ability of the item and the performer to establish a sense of identity between a 'real' situation and its artificial embodiment. This sense of identity is engineered through the exercise of control, allowing the audience to relax at the same time it identifies with the projected situation. This is done by creating a 'psychic distance,' by removing the audience far enough from the situation that it can see that it is not going to actively involve them immediately. Presented with an anxiety situation but relieved from the actual anxiety [t]he listener gains control, and with this limited control, relief. This relief becomes pleasure when the performance exercises control by the use of wit, by the imposition of rules and boundaries, by the creation of an imaginary world, or by some other limiting device which proclaims artifice.

(*'Rhetorical Theory'*, pp. 148-49)

Maxims lack this 'psychic distance', but they nevertheless exert control by

asserting an ideal of the community against the pressures of the anxiety-creating situation. For example, Dunnere or Byrhtwold speaking to their companions in the battle at Maldon, cannot have aimed to create that psychic distance. Plainly their maxims are intended to involve the audience immediately and actively, and are not aiming to create relief, but redoubled effort. Yet maxims still aim for the control of which Abrahams writes. They gain this not by projecting a metaphorical, artificial conflict which is resolved in the performance, but by projecting the community's beliefs or ideals onto the situation. The rhetorical argument of maxims here is that the particular difficulty is one which in the past has called for courage or endurance; or experience has shown that in situations like this, the problem will recur, or will only be resolved by a given course of action; or the community believes, in any such situation, and whatever the appearances, that God is in control, or that honour is most important. The force and value of maxims in the immediate context is their rhetoric of assertion: they assert the community's principles, ideals and beliefs—order, in fact—against the potential chaos of conflict. There is a direct relationship between the enactment context of the maxim and its social context. In the paradigmatic terms used by Seitel, it could be represented thus:



Fig. 2: Paradigm of maxim enactment

Here the terms of the maxim apply directly to the social situation, without the metaphorical dimension ($A \sim B$) of the proverb; this is represented by the unbroken line between the performance context and the application situation.

These two diagrams (Figs 1 and 2) serve to highlight some of the complexities of even the simplest of traditional interactions. By way of further illustration, and to locate this theory in the area of maxim usage in Old English poetry, one might compare, say, the proverb 'too many cooks spoil the broth' with Byrhtwold's 'resolve must be so much the firmer [...] as our strength diminishes', and examine them in the terms of proverb performance theory.

Both deal with an essentially similar problem, that of numbers of workers in relation to the job to be done, and the same relationship between the speaker and hearer ($X \sim Y$) would obtain whether the maxim or the proverb were used, so the performance context (I) is the same. In the proverb context (II), too many cooks (A) spoil (\sim) the broth (B), and this relates to the social context, the battle situation (III) by analogy: too many warriors (C) spoil or inhibit (\sim) the chances of achieving a glorious (if not victorious) outcome (D). The maxim, by contrast, bypasses the proverb context, the metaphorical level (II), and applies directly to the social situation, the battle: here, too few warriors (C) makes necessary (\sim) greater effort in order to achieve a glorious outcome (D). While there is not complete overlap in the terms, the example is sufficient to show the differences between proverbs and

maxims in performance.

Adding now Abrahams' rhetorical approach, we can see that the proverb projects an artificial conflict where too many workers prevent the successful accomplishment of the work (the proverb context); this would apply inversely to the battle situation (the social context) as reassurance that though their numbers are small, this fact makes a glorious outcome for the warriors more likely, not less; that the sheer numbers of the vikings will in fact militate against their glory should they win. The 'psychic distance' operates in generating a sense that the battle is like other situations, cooking for example. This does not diminish the importance of the battle, and it is observable that proverbs often take their metaphors from the animal realm or very simple forms of human situation or interaction; but the sense of control, and the relief of the audience, would be gained by them imaginatively identifying the battlefield as a kitchen, and the end result not life or death, but the flavour of soup. The analogy works by suggesting that the glorious outcome is likely even in the face of superior numbers; it makes no claim to absolute truth.⁵ There might be further relief for the men involved in the battle (the performance or enactment context) in seeing this as grim humour. One can only compare this with the urgency and directness of Byrhtwold's maxim, which concentrates on the real job in hand, and identifies the only way that men in his situation can react: redoubled mental and physical effort. The impersonal form of expression stresses both the absolute truth of the maxim and Byrhtwold's belief in its truth, and thus makes it a projection of the

community belief that this pattern of behaviour is the only appropriate reaction. The proverb works by generalising the situation and distancing the audience, the maxim works by specifying the situation and involving the audience in a corporate statement of response.

While this describes the effect of the maxims within a poem like The Battle of Maldon, there is another dimension when the maxim occurs in a poem. Although the proverb context of metaphor is lacking, there is an analogical context of poetic performance which exists by virtue of the fact that the maxims occur in a literary work. This dimension can be represented thus:

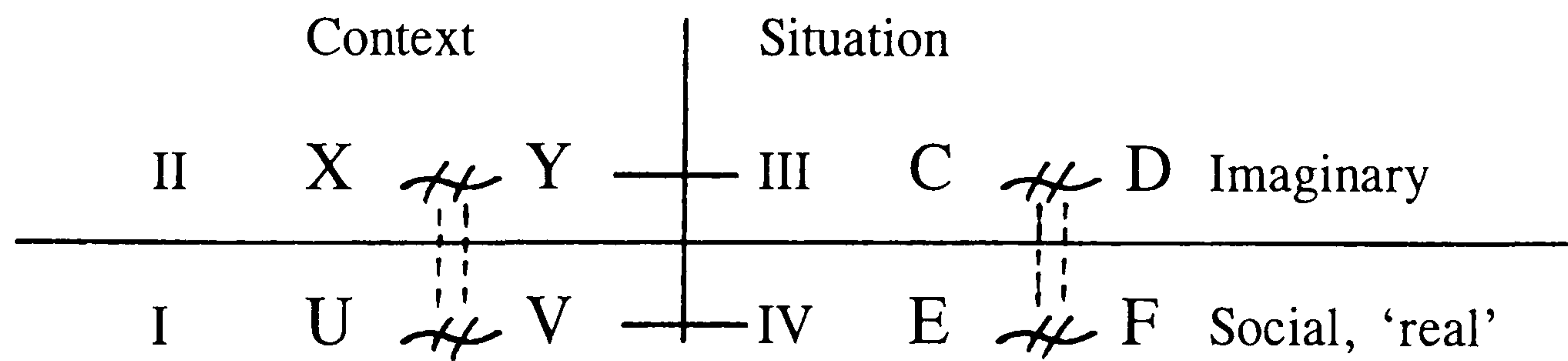


Fig. 3: Paradigm of literary maxim enactment

Here the upper level is the imaginary fictive world of the poem, the lower level is the ‘real’ world of the poet and his audience. The whole poem is itself the projection of an artificially contrived situation which works on the audience in a fashion similar in many ways to the way that proverbs work in conversation. Thus the poet (U) is related by the narrative (∼) to the audience (V) in the real world (I). The poem projects a performance context (X ∼ Y) which relates directly to the fictive social context (C ∼ D); both these

interactions (II and III) take place in the poem's fictional world. The audience make the analogical connection between their own real context (IV) and the fictive context, by relating the terms $C \sim D$ to themselves ($E \sim F$). By imaginatively (hence the broken lines) apprehending the terms of the maxim as relevant to themselves in an analogous real situation, the audience reaffirm the truth of those terms and reaffirm their social norms. Thus they approve the socially defined judgements of the maxims; and the relationship between the poet and audience in a socially defined, mutually pleasing, comforting, reassertion of their tradition, is strengthened. There is then, a symbiotic relationship between the poet, the audience, the tradition and the society: all support each other and depend on each other for an acknowledgement of their particular function.

This may be illustrated by way of three similar maxims, The Battle of Maldon 259-59, and 315b-16, and Beowulf 1534b-36.

a. Dunnere's maxim:

Ne mæg na wandian se þe wrecaþ þenceð

frean on folce, ne for feore murnan. (259-59)

(The man in the army who intends to avenge his lord can never flinch or care about his life.)

b. Byrhtwold's maxim:

A mæg gnornian

se ðe nu fram þis wigplegan wendan þenceð. (315b-16)

(The man who now intends to turn away from this battle-play

will always have reason to regret it.)

c. The Beowulf poet's maxim:

Swa sceal man don,

þonne he æt guðe gegan þenceð

longsumne lof, na ymb his lif cearað (1534b-36)

(So a man ought to behave when he intends to gain lasting
renown: he does not worry about his life at all.)

In a. and b., the poet (U) projects (\sim) the fictive world of the battle for his audience (V) presumably as entertainment; this is the social context of the poem's relation (I). Part of that fiction is the maxim enactment (II) between the characters (X) Dunnere and Byrhtwold and their hearers, the other warriors (Y). The terms of the maxim have a direct relevance for the men in the battle ($C \sim D$); the poem's audience affirm that in an analogous situation, the terms of the maxim would apply to them ($E \sim F$), and by agreeing with the poet's fiction, they reaffirm the social norms which inform the poet's fiction. In c. however, the poet addresses the maxim to his audience directly, and the interaction here essentially is the bottom half of the paradigm, though since the poet is prompted by the example of Beowulf, the fictive relationship of the terms of the maxim ($C \sim D$) have relevance in the real world situation.

The relationship $X \sim Y$ in a. and b. is different. Dunnere is an 'unorne ceorl', a simple, ordinary man, whereas Byrhtwold is an 'eald geneat', an old retainer. This is reflected in the slightly different terms C and D:

- a. no-one who intends to avenge his lord in battle
- C b. the one who intends to turn away from this battle
- c. the one who intends to get lasting fame in battle

- a. can
- ~ b. will
- c. should

- a. flinch or care about his life
- D b. always have reason to regret it
- c. not worry about his life (as Beowulf did not)

The Beowulf poet and Dunnere both give motives for heroic behaviour, gaining fame and avenging one's lord. Battle is a job to be done for good reasons for the ceorl and for the ordinary man in the audience of the Beowulf poet. But although Byrhtwold mentions Byrhtnoð lying dead in the dirt, for him the battle is (now) an end in itself, and shame will accompany the man who runs away. The difference between the two perspectives is that Dunnere fights for an end and for his lord as a ceorl, Byrhtwold fights to the end, out of his own sense of honour as an eorl.

The terms of the maxim would impinge on the audience much as they do in the fictive context. Term E is the personal correlative of term C, and F of D: so, a ceorl in the audience of Maldon would think, 'If I intended to avenge my lord in a battle [E], I could not [~] flinch or care about my life

[F]', and similarly with b. By thinking this (and so thinking is enforced by the generalisation of the maxim form), the audience agrees with the poet's projection, affirms its truth, asserts its validity for the community, and values the traditions that underpin the society.

It would perhaps be tedious to give further examples, but these give some insight into the social function of maxims. The paradigm is particularly useful when the maxims to be examined are all put in the mouths of characters in the poetic fiction as in The Battle of Maldon; it does not account so readily for authorial maxims such as we find in Beowulf, nor for the maxims which occur in non-narrative contexts. It is a tool for exploration of the role of maxims within a narrative poem, not a way of accounting definitively for maxims per se.

MAXIMS AND OTHER GENRES OF EXPRESSIVE FOLKLORE

Another article by Roger Abrahams published in 1968, 'A Rhetoric of Everyday Life: Traditional Conversational Genres',⁶ extended the notion of folklore as rhetoric from proverbs and riddles (the main preoccupation in 'Rhetorical Theory') to other forms of expressive folklore, such as superstitions, taunts, boasts, prayers and others. In this article he concentrates on how these items of folklore function in a socially cohesive way, and in the process, gives some remarkable insights into precisely how they work, and in what particular kinds of situation:

Proverbs [he argues] 'name' situations in which social stability

is repeatedly threatened, the potentially disruptive forces coming from within the group. Superstitions give a name to occasions in which order is in danger of being disrupted (or susceptible to being reinforced) through forces outside the group.

These traditional genres may handle problems in various ways, depending on whether the question is being faced immediately or whether the crisis has already passed but left a residual feeling of disorientation. [...] For instance, a proverb like 'haste makes waste' may be used in two quite different ways, which one might designate 'active' and 'passive.' In its active use, the proverb may arise in a discussion in which one person is confronted with a problem of having to decide whether to rush a job or not, and then the proverb recommends a specific and immediate course of action. In its passive use, a person may hurry a job and make a costly mistake as a result, and the use of the proverb then would simply provide the consolation of placing the mistake in an understandable—and therefore controllable—category of happenings, one that can perhaps be avoided in the future through following the dictates of the proverb.

The same could be pointed to in certain uses of superstition.

(*'Conversational Genres'*, p. 47)

Similarly, taunts and boasts:

The boast is, of course, a series of exaggerations about the powerful capacities of the speaker, intended to place his hearers in a subordinate position. [...] The taunt on the other hand, is directed towards 'the others,' toward individual onlookers [...] Taunts, like proverbs, point out where a problem is and propose an avoidance formula by directly 'making fun' of the errant one.

(‘Conversational Genres’, p. 55)

In summary, Abrahams notes,

By viewing taunts as regulators of social behavior, especially among children, and as a means of establishing a social hierarchy (temporary as it may be), we have been emphasizing traditional techniques for controlling through exclusion. Proverbs, curses, taunts and boasts all attempt to induce future action through the establishment of the speaker as arbiter of values (and therefore modes of action). These are the traditional ways of aggressively assuming the mantle of power, proverbs being only the least apparently aggressive of these forms because of the impersonal language used.

(‘Conversational Genres’, p. 56)

Abrahams acknowledges that there are areas of overlap between the

proverb and superstition or the taunt. The significance of this is that many of these functions can be performed by the maxim in Old English. ‘Feallan sceolan / hæþene æt hilde’ (of which more below) is clearly a taunt. A maxim like Hroðgar’s

God eaþe mæg

þone dolsceaðan dæda getwæfan. (Bwf 478b-79)

(God can easily put an end to the mad ravager’s deeds),

creates certain dissonances in the context. Is Hroðgar blindly trusting to Providence, and in the process snubbing Beowulf and his offer to face Grendel? Or perhaps we should read the maxim as Shippey suggests:

[...] when Hrothgar asserts that ‘God can easily put a stop to [Grendel’s] deeds (478-9), we are meant to take this positively, even though a cynic might reflect that though God can, possibly he will not, so that the saying remains inherently undisprovable. Maxims like these, above all, are not meant to be verified or criticised, but simply assented to.

(‘Maxims’, p. 42)

But seeing this maxim as in the technical sense superstitious,⁷—a kind of counteractant to the external, supernatural threat of Grendel, a verbal signing of the cross which comes naturally to pious people—is a way of interpreting the maxim which resolves the tensions, and allows the expression to reassert the ideal order to which both Hroðgar and Beowulf subscribe. The parallel expressions in Christ, ‘God eaþe mæg / gehælan hygesorge heortan minre’ (God can easily relieve the anguish of my heart, 173b-74) and Andreas, ‘God

eaðe mæg / heaðoliðendum helpe gefremman' (God can easily bring help to sailors, 425b-26) seem to confirm this: the focus is not on what God can, will, or might not do, but on the desire of the speaker to assert his belief that God is in control, in a context where a threat from outside is creating anxiety (malicious gossip for Joseph, the sea-storm for the Shipman—a fine touch of verisimilitude here, as sailors are among the most superstitious of people).

The proverb cited by Abrahams, 'haste makes waste' ('Conversational Genres', p. 47), as being used 'actively' and 'passively' is a negative one. In Beowulf, there are examples of positive maxims used both 'actively' or affectively, and 'passively' or evaluatively. For example, Wealhþeow urges Hroðgar to speak kind words to the Geats, 'swa sceal man don' (just as a man ought to, 1172b); and Beowulf, finding his sword useless against Grendel's mother, throws it away and trusts to his bare strength:

Swa sceal man don,

þonne he æt guðe gegan þenceð

longsumne lof, na ymb his lif cearað.

(1534b-36)

(So a man ought to behave when he intends to gain lasting
renown: he does not worry about his life at all.)

The first encourages graciousness, the second praises manly behaviour when it has happened; both assert positive community values.

These approaches from proverb performance, or expressive folklore

enactment theory seem to me to offer possibilities of application to maxim enactment in Old English poetry. Such theoretical approaches may enrich our understanding of the use and meaning of maxims in society and literature. I will now examine the maxims of The Battle of Maldon, using traditional literary analytical techniques alongside those from the folklore disciplines.

THE BATTLE OF MALDON

There are five maxims in The Battle of Maldon: two are put into Byrhtnoð's mouth, one is given to Dunnere and two to Byrhtwold. This is quite a high proportion of maxims for narrative verse. Scholars have made passing reference to the maxims, but despite several essays on the style of the poem, for example by E. D. Laborde,⁸ Irving⁹ and Robinson,¹⁰ the distinctive contribution of the maxims to the poem's rhetorical development has yet to be fully examined.

The situation of the poem is one of conflict, and the maxims respond to this situation 'in which social stability is threatened' in a very obvious way by the vikings. Interestingly, the maxims respond in a range of ways: Byrhtnoð uses the maxim as a taunt against the vikings, and another as a 'superstitious' response to his own action in allowing the vikings to cross the causeway. These two maxims focus on the threat to social stability from outside the community. The other three maxims focus on the internal ethical problem faced by the loyal warriors, and invoke 'an aura of moral rightness [and] the comfort of past community procedure' by way of influencing the

diminishing band to fight on.

1. The Taunt

The first maxim occurs at the centre of Byrhtnoð's reply to the messenger of the vikings:

Feallan sceolon

hæþene æt hilde. (54b—55a)

(The heathen are destined to fall in battle.)

The viking messenger's speech has insistently stressed by means of alliteration the two not very different alternatives facing Byrhtnoð. Firstly, he can buy peace: here the messenger uses beagas—gebeorge (money—protection, 30), golde—grið (gold—peace, 35), feoh—freode (money—peace, 39), sceattum—to scype (with money—to ships, 40). Secondly, he can prevent battle with payment: garræs—gafole (spear-rush—tribute, 32), spillan—spedaþ (destroy—prosper, 34). The speech is a masterpiece of insinuation, which is more than capped by Byrhtnoð's sarcasm as he picks up and echoes the messenger's phrases and ideas. Byrhtnoð throws back the alliterating phrases with slight changes which reverse the meaning and expectation of the vikings: to gafole—garas (as tribute—spears, 46), sceattum—to scype (with money—to ships, 56), grim guðplega—gofol (grim battle-play—tribute, 61). In a similar fashion, Byrhtnoð responds to the messenger's reference to the decision of the noblest present 'Gyf þu þæt gerædest þe her ricost eart' (if you who are most powerful here advise that, 36), by playing on the idea of ræd (counsel, advice) as he refers to his own loyalty and subordination to Æpelræd, in 'Æpelredes

eard, ealdres mines' (Æpelred, my lord's land, 53).¹¹ Further, in response to the messenger's attempt to split the defence by appealing to the ordinary men, eow (you all, 31), he takes up the audible reply and emphasises their wishes against those of the vikings, hi willað (they wish, 46) as against we willað (we wish, 35, 40). As has been noted by Earl R. Anderson¹² and others, he also replies to the viking offer of tribute as an alternative to the threat of hard battle, 'swa hearde hilde' (such hard battle, 33), by rejecting the shame attached to giving in so easily, 'Ne sceole ge swa softe sinc gegangan' (you shall not get treasure so easily, 59).

The parallels between the two speeches, and the skill the poet has used to give Byrhtnoð an edge over the persuasive and insinuating messenger are clear. But Byrhtnoð's maxim can be seen to form a riposte to another of the messenger's suggestions. Richard Hillman has argued that the messenger's words carry a Christian reference:

Gyf þu þæt gerædest þe her ricost eart,
 þæt þu þine leoda lysan wille,
 syllan sæmannum [...] (36-38a)

(If you who are most powerful here decide this, that you wish
 to save your people, [that you wish] to give to the sailors ...)

This can be paralleled from The Dream of the Rood 41, 'þa he wolde mancyn lysan' (when he [Christ] wished to save humankind).¹³ Hillman continues,

The parallel confirms that, for Christians, being 'saved' in this
 world can hardly be the point [...] What the Vikings have

offered Byrhtnoth and his men is a spurious worldly benefit at a spiritual cost aptly expressed in terms of tribute: to pay off the heathens would mean rendering unto Caesar the things which are God's. It is appropriate, therefore, that Byrhtnoth's defiant reply contains the first explicit reference to the Christian dimension: 'Feallan sceolon / hæpene æt hilde' (54-55). If set against the actual outcome of the battle, the lines seem ironic. But the very starkness of the statement highlights its anagogical significance, the reference to a higher truth. There is a level on which the boast cannot be made too boldly, since its fulfilment is ordained. The poet has begun to engage his audience on that level. (p. 388)

Persuasive though Hillman's article is, I do not think that he gives sufficient attention to the context or the forms of rhetoric which are being used. The messenger may rather be inviting Byrhtnoð to think of himself as a Christ-figure, saving his people from death through some suffering on his own part, the suffering of bearing the brunt of the tribute payment. But Byrhtnoð's maxim once again turns the messenger's suggestions on their head, not by engaging an anagogical level of understanding, but by promising Christian battle and heathen death; rather than a Christ-figure who suffers to save, Byrhtnoð will be a Christ-figure who will be victorious over his enemies.

James E. Cross is of course right when he points out that 'hæpene æt hilde' (the heathen in battle) in the maxim is a member of the formulaic

system ‘x æt hilde’,¹⁴ but the inference he draws is unwarranted:

hæþen here is another term for the enemy and, in view of this,
and of the other words for the Scandinavians, hæþen need have
no further connotation in the poet’s comment at Byrhtnoth’s
death. (pp. 108-9)

Cross was reacting to the notion that the vikings, particularly at Byrhtnoth’s death, are portrayed as demons. But not all the formulaic associations of the epithet hæþen in the maxim are covered by the ‘x æt hilde’ system. It draws on an alliterating pair, the verb feallan (to fall) and the noun or adjective fæge (doomed) in particular—as in,

Wæs seo tid cumen
þæt þær fæge men feallan sceoldon.

(104b-5)

(The time had come when doomed men must fall there),
and 119, 125-6 (and compare Bwf 1755, 2975, P135. 15, Brb 12). But there is also an association between the verb and death in general (e.g. ‘wæl feol on eorðan’, the corpse fell on the earth, 126, 303). The interesting thing is the substitution for the neutral terms fæge or wæl (and, to include the members of the formulaic system adduced by Cross, hysas [young warriors], hæleð [hero], hergum, herge [army, armies]) which can apply to either side, of the judgemental term, hæþen (heathen), which applies only to the vikings. The maxim implies not only the Christianity of Byrhtnoth and that of his side in the battle, but also all the religious sanctions that go with such a division between the Christian and the heathen. The maxim not only casts Byrhtnoth

in a heroic and Christian light, but overshadows the vikings with opprobrium. In other words, the maxim is used to taunt the vikings, affirming that they will die, and its terms exclude them from all that the English value. As a taunt, the maxim both affirms the rightness of the English, and scorns both the status and prowess of the vikings. Byrhtnoð takes the moral high ground, takes ‘the mantle of power’ and spurns the vikings. While he does not expressly say ‘paien unt tort e chrestiens unt dreit’, that is implicit in his taunt.¹⁵

The maxim is rhetorically distinct. The speeches of both messenger and Byrhtnoð are heavily personalised, with frequent use of a variety of first and second person pronouns, and direct reference to named third persons. Byrhtnoð’s sententious generalisation stands at the rhetorical centre of his speech as well as in the middle of it in terms of length, and it is given emphasis by its use of a markedly different mode of discourse. The generalising expression of the maxim makes it stand as a general truth of history and experience against the particularities of the dispute being resolved in the here-and-now of the poem’s present. By using it, Byrhtnoð brings another rhetorical ‘voice’ into his response to the messenger: not only that of the men around him (‘hwæt þis folc segeð’, what this company says), not only his own affirmation of loyalty and the will to resist, but also simple and undeniable force of received wisdom which insists that the battle threatened by the vikings will be costly to them. If this expression was proverbial, it was most likely formulated in the years of West Saxon supremacy following

Ælfred, otherwise it would have been more pious hope than practical experience; the maxim thus invokes the past experience of the English and by implication asserts that this case will be no different.

The maxim contributes to the characterisation of Byrhtnoð in two ways. It shows him as a man of Christian confidence: his belief was that the heathen fell and were defeated in battle, and he could taunt the vikings with this. And it shows him to be living in the past: the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle sees Maldon as the start of a humiliating series of defeats and a policy of appeasement, but there had been successful raids by this force around the eastern coast even before the battle.

2. The 'Superstitious' Utterance

Byrhtnoð's second maxim, spoken apparently to the vikings, but perhaps sotto voce (or even more likely, to himself), shifts from Christian confidence to Christian faith:

Nu eow is gerymed, gað ricene to us,
guman to guþe; god ana wat
hwa þære wælstowe wealdan mote.

(93-95)

(Now the way is opened up for you, come quickly to us, men
to battle. God alone knows who will control the battlefield.)

George Clark, arguing that the lines immediately preceding these do not censure Byrhtnoð, insists that:

The poem leaves no room for doubt on the cause of the English defeat, and that cause was not Byrhtnoth's chivalry, folly, or pride. According to the poem many of Byrhtnoth's men fled and their flight decided the outcome of the battle.¹⁶

This is true up to a point, but it is also true that Byrhtnoð's maxim raises doubt as to the outcome which his earlier maxim did not. Moreover, the associations of the maxim formula, and the context of the poem where the maxim occurs, have an air of grim foreboding which the rest of the poem simply expands into reality. T. D. Hill observes that Byrhtnoð's maxim 'illustrates at the same time his profound religiosity, his courage and his indifference to the practical consequences of his actions'.¹⁷ The way the maxim is embedded in its context suggests anything but indifference on the part of Byrhtnoð.

There are four examples of the 'God ana wat' formula, two of 'Meotud ana wat', and one of 'Drihten ana wat' in Old English poetry. They are all associated with death (see Chapter 1); and Byrhtnoð's reference to the wælstow (field of death) in the maxim emphasises this association. In the next lines, the grimness is reinforced in various ways, not least in the insistent alliteration on w.¹⁸

Wodon þa wælwulfas for wætere ne murnon,
wicinga werod, west ofer Pantan,
ofer scir wæter scyldas wegon,
lidmen to lande linde bæron. (96-99)

(Then the wolves of slaughter advanced west over the Pante.
the band of vikings cared nothing for the water; the sailors
carried their shields, bore their linden shields, over the shining
water to land.)

As Robinson notes, Byrhtnoð's wæl is repeated in the compound wælwulfas (wolves of slaughter), which suggests 'an inevitable association between the wælwulfas and the beasts of battle, among which wolves are so often numbered' (p. 33). There is a grisly savagery against human beings which is expressed by wælwulf in both its occurrences in Old English poetry;¹⁹ and the 'beast of carrion' image is intensified by the fact that 'the hostile warriors [...] have been substituted for the third of the usual triad of of beasts in the scene, and th[is] compound should hence be regarded as [a] transferred epithet[...]'.²⁰

'Superstitions', we remind ourselves, 'give a name to occasions in which order is in danger of being disrupted [...] through forces outside the group'. The advance of the vikings like a pack of wolves eager for carrion, makes the threat of disruption real, present and profoundly disturbing. In such a situation, with doubtless real belief, Byrhtnoð invokes God, to take the edge off the shock of the disorienting experience, reimposing a sense of order by aligning this experience with others of its class, through giving it its traditional name.

(Abrahams, 'Conversational Genres', p. 47)

The 'traditional name' is the 'God ana wat' maxim which controls the

experience of deep uncertainty (as it does in the other places where it is used), by asserting God's knowledge, and hence concern with, the outcome. The maxim is also used in a 'passive' way, to evaluate Byrhtnoð's action. Since the context is a negative one, one where a counteractant order under God has to be invoked against the disruptive force which Byrhtnoð's action has unleashed, the maxim implicitly recognises that his action was a leap of faith which may have very serious consequences. The maxim 'provide[s] the consolation of placing the mistake in an understandable [...] category of happenings'. If Byrhtnoð's action is not a mistake, or at least not one overtly recognised as such by him, it nevertheless necessitates some consolation. Overall, the associations of the maxim might be conveyed by a 'translation' like 'Heaven help us!'

The whole passage, starting from Byrhtnoð's decision to allow the vikings across the causeway, focusing then on his maxim with its traditional association with death, and moving finally to the reckless savagery of the vikings as they cross the stream, evokes a sense of foreboding which anticipates the defeat of the English.

The two maxims given to Byrhtnoð, whatever other functions they have in the context, focus attention on his Christianity. If he has lost some of his Christian confidence in his own rightness in the second maxim, he nevertheless evaluates his action in the light of his Christian faith, and expresses a conviction that the outcome is implicitly in God's hands, whoever

wins, thus affirming the values that distinguish the English from the vikings. The poet's emphasis on Byrhtnoð's Christianity in these maxims, later reinforced by his borrowing motifs from the saint's life to describe Byrhtnoð's death,²¹ ultimately has the effect of engaging the audience at the anagogical level, as Hillman puts it. What is ultimately valuable in terms of the poem is not defeat or victory, but whether the characters are faithful to the Christian belief which informs their social and heroic traditions.

3. The Cohesive Maxim

After the death of Byrhtnoð and the flight of the sons of Odda, representative speakers announce their intentions and denounce the cowards. There is a heavy emphasis on the personal pronouns as each one of these important men calls for attention and declares his desire to avenge Byrhtnoð. Dunnere, the simple freeman, does the same as the noblemen, shaking his spear to call for attention, but his speech is very brief:

Ne mæg na wandian se þe wrecaþ þenceð
freaþ on folce, ne for feore murnan.

(259-59)

(The man in the army who intends to avenge his lord can never
flinch or care about his life.)

The generalisation has immediate effect:

Þa hi forð eodon, feores hi ne rohton;
ongunnon þa hiredmen heardlice feohtan.
grame garberend, and god bædon

þæt hi moston gewrecan hyra winedrihten
and on hyra feondum fyl gewyrcean.

(260-64)

(Then they advanced, they cared not for their lives; the retainers, hostile spearmen, fought fiercely and prayed God that they might avenge their beloved lord and bring death to their enemies.)

Up to this point, there has been a fragmentary response to the catastrophe which faces the English: all the retainers saw that Byrhtnoð was dead, and those who were brave resolved either to avenge him or die in the process (202-08). Young Ælfwine, Byrhtnoð's kinsman, takes the role of blood-avenger in terms of personal feud; Offa generalises that perspective as an exhortation to the thegns, urging them to encourage one another to fight with swords and spears, and curses Godric; Leofsunu responds to Offa's words specifically with a beot (boast) that he will die rather than return lordless, a promise which he thereupon fulfils. All these are personal assertions of cultural values. It is Dunnere's words which make the whole situation and the appropriate response clear to all. The overriding priority for the English must be to avenge their lord, and no personal considerations must be allowed to stand in the way. The self-evident truth of the maxim is clear even to the Northumbrian hostage, who might be the one having most reservations about loyalty to Byrhtnoð, and 'he ne wandode na æt þam wigplegan' (he did not flinch at all in the battle, 268).

Here we see the poet using the maxim primarily in an affective manner, as an indicator of motivation and a stimulus to action. The threat to stability arises from the disruptive forces within the group, which are the purely personal reasons which the warriors give, or have shown, for fighting on or running away. The cohesive force of the maxim, simplifying and generalising, reduces the complexities of the situation to a basic obligation incumbent on them all, whatever their role, status or feelings. This is made the more evident by the way the words of the maxim are woven into the fabric of the narrative as it is fulfilled. The maxim also functions as an evaluation of the actions of the sons of Odda in their costly disruption of the unity of the army, their self-seeking, and their abnegation of duty and inversion of the courtly ritual of gift-giving:

Hi bugon þa fram beaduwe þe þær beon noldon.
 Þær wurdon Oddan bearn ærest on fleame,
 Godric fram guþe, and þone godan forlet
 þe him mænigne oft mearh gesealde;
 he gehleop þone eoh þe ahte his hlaford,
 on þam gerædum þe hit riht ne wæs,
 and his broðru mid him begen ærndon,
 Godwine and Godwig, guþe ne gymdon,
 ac wendon fram þam wige and þone wudu sohton,
 flugon on þæt fæsten and hyra feore burgon.

(185-194)

(Then those who had no wish to be there fled from the battle.

The sons of Odda were the first to flee the battle; Godric left the good man who had often given him many a horse; he mounted the horse that his lord owned and [got into] the trappings, as was not right, and his brothers Godwine and Godwig both ran with him. They did not care for battle, but turned away from the conflict and sought the wood, fled to safety and saved their lives.)

4. 'I Will Not Cease From Mental Fight'

The last two maxims of the poem are given to Byrhtwold. Like Byrhtnoð he makes a formal speech with his shield raised and shaking his spear (compare lines 42-43); like Byrhtnoð he encourages the men, like Byrhtnoð he is old (line 169),²² and like Byrhtnoð he uses maxims to give the greatest possible impact to his speech. He is the only character of whose speech the verb læran (to exhort) is used, perhaps implying that it is lar (what is taught, by extension wisdom):

Byrhtwold mapeode, bord hafene

(se wæs eald geneat), æsc acwehte;

he ful baldlice beornas lærde:

‘Hige sceal þe heardra, heorte þe cenre,

mod sceal þe mare, þe ure mægen lytlað.

Her lið ure ealdor eall forheawen,

god on greote. A mæg gnornian

se ðe nu fram þis wigplegan wendan þenceð.’

(309-16)

(Byrhtwold, an old retainer, spoke, raised his shield and shook his spear; he instructed the warriors with great boldness. ‘Resolve must be so much the firmer, heart so much the bolder, courage so much the greater, in proportion as our strength diminishes. Our good lord lies dead here, in the dirt. The man who now intends to turn away from this battle-play will always have reason to regret it.’)

What Byrhtwold advises through the maxims is that all the physical and mental faculties of the warriors must be concentrated to offset numerical losses. And as well as the positive encouragement to courage, he gives a negative, disincentive, reason for compromise or flight. The sanction ‘reason for regret’ is unspecified, but applied evaluatively to the conduct of the cowards, the maxim would be self-fulfilling: the poem repeatedly names names, and the odour of the names of the sons of Odda is not good.

Like Dunnere’s maxim earlier, these maxims locate the threat to the community in the mental realm. What is important is not so much the diminution of numbers (though that is not ignored) as the mental concentration of the warriors. The intent to avenge is all-important to Dunnere; the focus of the faculties on the job in hand is Byrhtwold’s prime concern. The sanction for physical backing out of the battle in the second of Byrhtwold’s maxims is not physical but mental suffering. The cowards may have saved

their lives, but they have prostituted their minds: they did not concentrate, did not remember, they abandoned goodness and rectitude along with Byrhtnoð and their duty.

A Christian audience might have sensed an echo of Mark 12. 30 in Byrhtwold's iteration of the four faculties, 'Diliges Dominum Deum tuum ex toto corde tuo, et ex tota anima tua, et ex tota mente tua, et ex tota vitute tua'. The recognition of this would support the notion that fighting to the death against the heathen was a Christian duty, even a form of obedience to the command to love God. But Byrhtwold's maxim emphasises the mental over against the physical, and in this it follows the pattern of the whole poem. At the very start of the fragment of the poem, Byrhtnoð urges his men to concentrate:

Het þa hyssa hwæne hors forlætan,
feor afysan, and forð gangan,
hicgan to handum and to hige godum.

(2-4)

(He then instructed each of the warriors to leave the horses, drive them away, and step forward, and to concentrate on their arms and courage.)

And with the maxims, Byrhtwold gives an assurance that he intends to fulfil the demands of his view of the heroic code, thinking not of turning away, but of dying beside Byrhtnoð:

Ic eom frod feores: fram ic ne wille,

ac ic me be healfe minum hlaforde,

be swa leofan men, licgan þence. (317-19)

(I am old; I will not leave, but I intend to lie dead beside my
lord, beside the man so beloved.)

He not only encourages others, he persuades himself. The rhetorical strategy here is simple: assertion of the general principle that the few have to fight harder than the many to achieve the same (unspecified) result; statement of the fact that Byrhtnoð is dead; assertion of the general principle that running away will cause (unspecified) regret; statement of the fact that he, Byrhtwold, for one, intends to die with his lord. The intercalation of the general and specific, and the minimal linking of the two by means of deictics in the maxims, makes the speech of Byrhtwold a very effective, apparently socially sanctioned and personally applied, statement of ‘the ideal of men dying with their lord’.

5. The Poet’s Strategy

In a poem which deals with a military defeat, the poet focuses on attitude. By asserting the community’s values of vengeance for a slain lord, unbending will in doing what is right, not caring for personal safety but putting duty first, and by promising the community’s disapprobation of those who give in to the temptation to back out, the poem contrives to present the defeat as a victory of spirit for those who died. In a general sense, an Anglo-Saxon would probably agree that this was the kind of principle his society

stood for. But as the poem progresses, the principles become less general, and 'the ideal of men dying with their lord' emerges as a focus.

Rosemary Woolf argued that The Battle of Maldon probably depended on the Old Norse Bjarkamál as a source for this ideal.²³ Roberta Frank has more recently shown that the ideal is not as restricted in its attestation as Woolf proposed,²⁴ that there are contemporary and near contemporary documents which, like Maldon, look forward to 'an eleventh century Europe in which the profession of warrior was a way of achieving religious perfection and a martyr's crown' (p. 106). Having discussed the evidence for existence of the ideal, Frank comes to the following conclusion:

the Maldon 'ideal' is never sensible, worldly, or rational, never reflects 'general opinion' like the proverbs ['He that fights and runs away / May live to fight another day' etc.] heading this essay. It attests to the existence of paradoxes and wonders, to moments of consciousness in which man seems illuminated by a divine or demonic force. (p. 105)

It is true that the ideal is not sensible, even in Anglo-Saxon society, and that Beowulf, for example, did not, when occasion offered, take the opportunity of dying with Hygelac. There is a sense in Maldon that the warriors are driven into the ideal as the only way of making something positive out of the disaster. But it is important to notice the fact that the Maldon poet tries to make the ideal into 'general opinion', or tries to imply

that it already reflects ‘general opinion’ by inserting it into Byrhtwold’s maxims.

The presence of deictics in these two maxims was noted in Chapter 2: they are ‘applied maxims’. Removing the deictics makes perfectly intelligible expressions:

*Hige sceal þe heardra, heorte þe cenre,
mod sceal þe mare, þe mægen lytlað.

(*Resolve must be so much the firmer, heart so much the bolder, courage so much the greater, in proportion as strength diminishes.)

*A mæg gnornian
se þe fram þam wigplegan wendan þenceð.

(*The man who intends to turn away from the battle-play will always have reason to regret it.)

The second of the two even makes better verse without the deictics. Donald Scragg has the following note on line 316:

There is no other certain example of fram followed by the instrumental in Old English. At line 193 it governs the dative. Perhaps, in view of the high number of unstressed syllables preceding the first lift wig, we should regard þis as a scribal introduction caused by misreading of wig (insular w is not unlike þ, and g might be mistaken for s).²⁵

Mitchell maintains that fram always governs the instrumental or dative,²⁶ and

since in most cases they are indistinguishable, the point is not, perhaps, very significant. But the number of unstressed syllables before the first stress is undoubtedly unusual. Rather than supposing scribal error, I would like to suggest that the deictics nu (now) and bis (this) are the additions of the poet to an already existing maxim.

The effect of the deictics in their context is to focus the generalisation of the maxim on the particular situation. Without the deictic pronoun ure (our), the first maxim could apply in a general sense to the individual or the army. But with the context and referent specified, and developed further in ure ealdor (our lord) and the applied maxim which follows, the whole speech tendentiously develops the 'ideal of men dying with their lord'. Ure, by making it clear that Byrhtwold is applying his maxim to the situation where warriors are being cut down one by one, establishes an ideal that is not, indeed, 'sensible, worldly, or rational': the battle is being lost, Byrhtnoð is dead, many would think it acceptable to come to terms. But in this situation, Byrhtwold's maxim declares, our resistance must be unbending. Similarly, without the deictics nu and bis in the second maxim, it makes the obvious point that if you run away, you may miss a great victory; if you are constantly thinking about running away, you are not concentrating on the job in hand. But in the specific context, at the particular juncture (nu) in the particular battle (bis), the maxims hold up an ideal which demands the death of those who fulfil it; and the statements Byrhtwold gives after each of the maxims, link that death with loyalty to Byrhtnoð.

The significance of Byrhtwold's maxims is that they give traditional form to an ideal which is apparently relatively new, and they do it by applying the generalisations to, and in, a particular context. Maxims, which express the community's values and beliefs, are here manipulated by the poet: for the purpose of glorifying those who actually died with their lord, and possibly in order to promote a policy of stern resistance against the vikings as suggested by Busse and Holtei,²⁷ the poet makes the 'ideal of men dying with their lord' seem the 'general opinion', the heroic custom, the traditional Germanic ideal.

6. Summary

These five maxims play an important part in the style and rhetoric of The Battle of Maldon. The poet gives implicit support to the notion that maxims are proverbial and traditional by giving them to two kinds of characters: the old and experienced warriors who function as spokesmen for the English company as a whole, namely Byrhtnoð and Byrhtwold; and the simple ceorl, Dunnere, who is not necessarily old,²⁸ but like the Shakespearean fool, speaks the truth in wise maxims. The maxims add to the characterisation: Byrhtnoð is motivated by heroic and Christian considerations, and is consciously taking a risk in allowing the vikings across the causeway; Byrhtwold is motivated by what he sees as the heroic obligation to die with his lord.

The maxims express the ideal and the proper order against the

tendency of the prevailing situation. Byrhtnoð's first maxim taunts the messenger with the fact that the vikings will not escape without loss in the encounter with the Christian English; with the rest of his reply it shows Byrhtnoð's mastery of words as well as weapons. His second maxim evaluates his decision to let the vikings across, and acknowledges that the end result may not be desirable in a temporal sense, but is nevertheless in the hands of God. This maxim is essentially evaluative rather than affective: it does not 'amount [...] to a prayer' as Richard Hillman (p. 389) suggests; it is more a 'superstitious' counteractant: this fact has implications for our understanding of the poet's censure of Byrhtnoð in lines 89-90.

Dunnere's maxim, as I have shown, is principally affective, and in the lines immediately following, the poet echoes the key words of the maxim in showing how the retainers respond, and indeed how the cowards fail to respond. There is ample evidence that the duty of avenging one's lord was incumbent on members of all social strata, as the swan who avenged the ealdorman Cumbra on Sigebyrht in the 'Cynewulf and Cyneheard' episode in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle 755, shows. While Byrhtwold's maxims are similarly affective, intending to influence the behaviour of the hearers, there is less evidence for an established ideal of men dying with their lord than there is for them avenging him without regard for personal safety. The deictics in these maxims apply them to a situation which demands nothing less than the death of the loyal retainers, and the poet intends that outcome to be seen as a traditional obligation and an ideal. In the discussion of the social

function of maxims, I suggested that the imaginative assent of the audience to the application of the maxim in the fictional situation implies their assent to the application of the maxim to themselves in an analogous real situation. Thus by means of his fiction, the poet could transform the costly defeat of the English at Maldon into a victory of the heroic and Christian spirit which would encourage, if not morally compel, resistance against the marauding Scandinavian forces.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 5

1. 'Proverbs and the Ethnography of Speaking Folklore', American Anthropologist, 66 (1964), 70-85 (repr. in Analytic Essays in Folklore, pp. 35-49, and cited from this edition).
2. (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1982), pp. 28-138.
3. 'Introductory Remarks to a Rhetorical Theory of Folklore', Journal of American Folklore, 81 (1968), 143-58.
4. 'Proverbs: A Social Use of Metaphor', Genre, 2 (1969), 143-61 (p. 147).
5. Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, 'Towards a Theory of Proverb Meaning', Proverbium, 22 (1973), 821-27, by examining contextual and paralinguistic features of proverb usage, argues that 'a proverb's meaning, rather than being autonomous [...] is [...] contextually specified' (p. 821).
6. Southern Folklore Quarterly, 32 (1968), 44-59.
7. Alan Dundes, 'The Structure of Superstition', Midwest Folklore, 11 (1961) 25-33 (repr. in Analytic Essays in Folklore, pp. 88-94 and quoted from this edition), dismisses the notions that superstition necessarily involves survival of barbarism, irrationality or appeal to a religious system other than one of the world's major religions. Superstition is essentially about conditions and results, the relation of which is in some sense to do with 'signs' rather than causes (spilling salt means bad luck). Counteractant superstitious actions are designed to avert the result (throwing salt over the left shoulder).
8. 'The Style of The Battle of Maldon', MLR, 19 (1924). 401-417.

9. 'The Heroic Style in The Battle of Maldon', Studies in Philology, 58 (1961), 457-467.
10. 'Some Aspects of the Maldon Poet's Artistry', JEGP, 75 (1976), 25-40.
11. The Canterbury versions of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (E and F) emphasise this notion of ræd in their annals: 'on þam geare man gerædde þ[æt] man geald ærest gafol Deniscan mannum [...] þæne ræd gerædde Siric arceb[iscop]' (in that year it was considered advisable to give the Danes tribute for the first time; Archbishop Sigeric advised that course; Earle and Plummer, s.a. 991). And it is noticeable as a feature of the Laud chronicler's writing, when he sums up the desperate plight of the English in the annal for 1010, 'Ðonne bead man ealle witan to cynge, [ond] man þonne rædan scolde hu man þisne eard werian sceolde. Ac þeah man hwæt þonne rædde. þ[æt] ne stod furðon ænne monað' (Then all the counsellors were called to the king, and then it had to be determined how the land could be protected. But whatever scheme was devised lasted no more than a month.)
12. 'Flyting in The Battle of Maldon', NM, 71 (1970), 197-202.
13. 'Defeat and Victory in The Battle of Maldon: The Christian Resonances Reconsidered', English Studies in Canada, 11 (1985), 385-395.
14. 'Oswald and Byrhtnoth: A Christian Saint and a Hero who is Christian', English Studies, 46 (1965), 93-109.
15. Cecily Clark, 'Byrhtnoth and Roland: A Contrast', Neophilologus, 51 (1967), 288-93, perhaps overemphasises the contrast. The classic crusading cry is from the Chanson de Roland, ed. by F. Whitehead (Oxford: Blackwell, 1947), line 1015.

16. 'The Hero of Maldon: Vir Pius et Strenuus', Speculum, 54 (1979), 257-282 (p. 258). Compare also George Clark, 'The Battle of Maldon: A Heroic Poem', Speculum, 43 (1968), 52-71, 'it is not until after the flight of the cowards that the English speak or act as if they were fighting without hope, and the narrator is conspicuously noncommittal before the battle begins' (p. 57).
17. 'History and Heroic Ethic in Maldon', Neophilologus, 54 (1970), 291-296 (p. 296 note 9).
18. G. C. Britton, 'The Characterization of the Vikings in The Battle of Maldon', NQ, 210 (1965), 85-87 (p. 86).
19. Cross (pp. 107-108) underrates the depreciatory quality of wælwulf in Andreas 149 and here: it is not 'general militarization' nor demonisation of the Mermedonians or vikings, but rather their animal and sub-human appetite that is focused upon in the word.
20. M. S. Griffith, 'Convention and Originality in the "Beasts of Battle" Typescene', ASE, 22 (1993), 179-199 (p. 191).
21. See further my article, 'Interpretation of The Battle of Maldon, Lines 84-90: A Review and Reassessment', Studia Neophilologica, 67 (1995), 149-164 (pp. 152-54).
22. Robinson reviews the evidence and the literature on the question of Byrhtwold's age and concludes,

What makes it especially likely that Byrhtwold was intended to be an old warrior [...] is the apparent fact that it is a standard convention of Germanic heroic literature for an aging warrior

to assume responsibility for reminding his younger comrades of the sacred duty of loyalty and revenge which the ancient code prescribes for them. (p. 39)

23. 'The Ideal of Men Dying with their Lord in the Germania and in The Battle of Maldon', ASE, 5 (1976), 63-81.

24. 'The Ideal of Men Dying with their Lord in The Battle of Maldon: Anachronism or Nouvelle Vague', in People and Places in Northern Europe 500-1600: Essays in Honour of Peter Hayes Sawyer, ed. by Ian Wood and Niels Lund (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1991), pp. 95-106.

25. The Battle of Maldon, ed. by D. G. Scragg, Manchester Old and Middle English Texts (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1981), p. 84.

26. Bruce Mitchell, Old English Syntax, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), I, § 1188, p. 503.

27. 'The Battle of Maldon: a Historical, Heroic and Political Poem', Neophilologus, 65 (1981), 614-621.

28. The Battle of Maldon, ed. by E. V. Gordon, Methuen's Old English Library (London: Methuen, 1937), p. 57 note to line 256, discusses the possibility that unorne might mean old, but plainly it does not.

CHAPTER 6

CHRISTIAN OR NOT?

In the nineteenth century and early in this, the tide of paganising interpretations was in full flood, but despite some tidal creeks supplied by Scandinavian waters, that tide is now at an ebb. Williams's Gnomic Poetry in Anglo-Saxon is informed throughout not only by the conviction that the Maxims poems retain genuine paganism, but also that the poetry which is 'heathen' is better than that which is not. E. G. Stanley has traced the history of paganising interpretation in The Search for Anglo-Saxon Paganism and its roots particularly in German nationalism and Romanticism.¹ But the search continues, and grows more ingenious: not infrequently the Maxims poems are cited when 'pagan survivals' are being sought,² or paganism is found in the obscurer reaches of other wisdom literature, like Solomon and Saturn; alternatively, anything from a boar to bravery can be assumed to have pagan associations and thus almost wherever these items feature, they would be understood, and are now assumed, to be redolent of heathenism. Such ideas might be dismissed out of hand except that the first kind of interpretation seems to have gained a certain respectability in work on the wisdom literature, and the second is found in basic text-books like the Guide to Old English and the Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature. I would like to examine some of the paganising interpretations of the Maxims in particular, and rather more briefly to point out some objections to the 'pagan associations' theory, at least partly to acknowledge that any argument for the survival of pre-

Christian material needs to be subject to checks, and deal with the available evidence in a responsible manner. But then I would like to suggest that there might be grounds for believing that there is some pre-Christian tradition retained in a maxim and a gnome.

PAGANISM IN WISDOM LITERATURE

This argument generally relies on the apparent disjointedness of the poems, and in an extreme form, the view was expressed by Williams. In Maxims II,

þrymmas syndan cristes myccle

wyrd byð swiðost

(the powers of Christ are great—fate is strongest),

‘4b and 5a are distinct, Christ and Fate being put in opposition to each other, the predominance of the latter testifying to remote heathen origin’ (p. 107). This is explicable given the theories of the time. What is less explicable is that Williams’s views on a passage from Solomon and Saturn should be repeated more or less verbatim 30 years later by R. J. Menner.³

Williams wrote of these lines in the dialogue,

Nieht bið wedera ðiestrost, ned bið wyrda heardost,

sorh bið swarost byrðen, slæp bið deaðe gelicost.

(312-13)

(Night is the darkest of weather conditions, hardship is the most difficult of fates, sorrow is the heaviest burden, sleep is

most like death),

‘in 310 ff.,⁴ we read a series of gnomes which are as brief and pointed in form and as Teutonic in content as a series of the Cotton Manuscript [‘Winter byð cealdost’, winter is coldest, Mx2 5b]’. Menner’s comments are sane and judicious until he reproduces Williams:

Gnomic verses, those sententious sayings concerning moral wisdom or observation of life, marked by their pregnant style and rhetorical balance, are found incidentally in Old English and Old Norse verse as well as in such collections as those of the Exeter and Cotton manuscripts and the Hávamál. The type beginning with ne mæg is found twice in Solomon’s answers:

Ne mæg fyres feng ne forstes cile,
 snaw ne sunne somod eardian (346-347).
 Ne mæg mon forildan ænige hwile
 ðone deoran sið, ac he hine adreogan sceall
 (353-354).

The mere statement with bið is illustrated by the fine long lines:

Nieht bið wedera ðiestrost, ned bið wyrda heardost,
 sorh bið swarost byrðen, slæp bið deaðe gelicost.
 (303-304)

[...] The [...] three gnomic passages mentioned above may be considered just as pagan in sentiment as they are Germanic in expression.

(pp. 65-66, Menner’s punctuation)

Menner's own notes point to parallels in Alfred's Boethius for the first (p. 135), Job and the Psalms (among others) for the second (p. 135), and 'the Latin dialogues of question and answer' for the last (p. 131). For the second of these we might add the parallel of the Proverb from Winfrid's Time, of which it might be a variant (note the use of the verb forieldan⁵ and sið in collocation with the idea of inevitable death); for the third, the simile of sleep and death, we might add the fact that biblical passages regularly use dormio and derivatives to refer to death: I Thessalonians 4. 13, for example. Quite clearly, Menner had no reason at all to suppose these maxims to be pagan, and had given no real thought to why, in the first two, the spokesman for Christianity, Solomon, should give voice to pagan sentiments. The only explanation I can offer is that Menner retained in his memory Williams's neat phrase, and he reproduced it like a maxim.⁶

Many writers on the Maxims poems believe that they contain different strata of tradition. Lynn L. Remly and Loren C. Gruber have most recently expressed this belief, though in slightly different terms.⁷ Remly suggests that the earliest stratum of poetry is that which expresses 'sacred experience', a later level attempts to recreate that experience, and still later levels consist of 'moralizing commentary of [sic] facets of human society, and finally [...] rational consideration of the demands of a personal God' (p. 158). Remly carefully avoids invoking terms such as heathen or pagan, but clearly the later of the strata she distinguishes are Christian, or 'homiletic' or 'rational', whereas equally clearly the earlier strata are 'religious' or 'sacred' but not in

any definable sense Christian.

Gruber is not so diffident in his categorisation. He believes that Maxims I 'began as archaic initiatory utterances of an absolute, religious nature and were weakened to their present form as mere assertions about the disposition of the universe. The motion here is from religion to philosophy' (p. 26, Gruber's emphasis). Gruber's dependence on Remly (which he acknowledges) is already clear from this. And though we never quite find out what 'initatory' really means for Gruber, there is some suggestion that it is initiation into an esoteric or 'magical' (p. 33 etc.) wisdom. He comments on Maxims II that the poet 'may have written down pagan and Christian sayings without understanding them, without believing them, or without fully understanding how he had changed them. His materials were already remote to him' (p. 40).

Given the assumptions that theorising post-dates experience, and that no single perspective unites the miscellanea of the poems (neither of which is in every case necessarily true), a not unnatural question at this stage might be whether the views of these critics can be supported from other sources, and whether they add anything to our understanding. Two fairly typical examples from each will suffice to show some of the weaknesses of the arguments.

Commenting on Maxims I, 23b-25a ('Tu beoð gemæccan' etc., two are mates), Remly writes:

First of all, the speaker reveals a fascination with the central mystery of the world—the appearance of life—and this fascination is expressed in a form which emphasizes the bare fact itself, the irreducible reality, not any active speculation on it. Two people, a man and a woman, bring forth children by means of birth. It is sufficient for the receptive mind to notice what is in the world, since this notice fills him with a sense of sacred power. [...] Either the initial perception or the recollection of a sacred experience (which is most likely what these sentences represent) can fill the mind with awe and a sense of power. In this case, the mind is overtaken and empowered by the astonishing fact that birth is, and the fact is expressed as a series of elemental images. [...] The alliteration, short lines (8-10 syllables), and four-stress pattern admit only the essential elements of the sacred perception: wer, wif, woruld, and cennan. Indeed the shortness of the line and the number of stresses has the effect of a chant, fixing in the open mind a sense of wonder at the startling fact of birth. [...] Line 25a, seemingly a mere redundancy and a silly one at that, becomes neither a redundancy nor silly if accepted as springing from the awed state of mind I have been describing.

(p. 152)

There is no reason to dispute the notion that a sense of wonder

underlies the expression here, but Remly has ignored the fact that, as I have already noted, almost exactly the same expression occurs at the beginning of The Fortunes of Men, where the wonder is attributed to ‘godes meahtum’ (the power of God). The tightness of phrasing might just as well be due to the fact that this expression was proverbial as that it expresses a ‘sacred experience’. Certainly, bearn and gebyrd are frequently collocated, and ‘in / on woruld cennan’ is a formula (Gen 188, 923, FtM 2). And despite the assertion that only the essential elements of the sacred perception are admitted, ‘in woruld’ is strictly redundant and smacks rather of cliché (compare the modern ‘bring into the world’). The immediately preceding lines point out things that go together, wisdom and counsel, right and the wise, good people with good. This establishes not only a context in which man and woman go together, but also one where two rather than any other number appropriately go together, which might at least suggest a nod in the direction of moral teaching. In short, there is little to distinguish these lines of poetry as earlier, more elemental, more primitive or more sacred, than other maxims which observe the patterns of the world and express them in the patterned language of poetry.

Later, commenting on the passage concerning the blind man, lines 39b-43, Remly writes,

The speaker’s attempt here is to arouse in himself a kind of sacred experience, the feeling of terror at the thought of lifelong darkness. As in the earlier lines, the diction calls upon

concrete, elemental facts of life in nature: the blind man sees neither stars, sun, nor moon—three of the most striking images in archaic man's experience—but in this case, their use does not spring from the speaker's immediate sense of their power so much as it does from the active attempt to work himself sympathetically into the mind of the blind man in order to feel what his inner darkness must be. [...] The word 'sore' in particular suggests the quality of pain the blind man must know, and the phrase 'he alone knows' reminds the observer of the kind of loneliness the man in darkness must feel. The assertion that there is no hope summarizes the blind man's plight, particularly because of the alliteration which links ana and edhwyrft. I think it not accidental that these lines are markedly longer than the lines on birth and death (16-20 syllables). As the immediacy of a sacred experience, with its tension exploding into images, is replaced by contemplative recreation of an earlier experience or a logical consideration of some fact, one would well expect a relaxation in the form of utterance, especially due to an increase in the number of structure words used. (p. 155)

Once again, there is no particular reason to dispute the notion that the poet has experienced a sense of terror at the thought of blindness: every sensitive person must. But that reference to sun, moon and stars must be

archaic, and that there is a significant emotional difference between these lines and those on birth above—that these lines are somehow more ‘logical’—is so entirely subjective as to be meaningless. Despite the fact that these are hypermetric lines, there is no redundancy, unless the repetition of torht be regarded as such.

There is an element of hopelessness about the blind man’s case, but this does not justify Remly’s procedure, which is to translate tendentiously, and to pluck the lines from their context. In Remly’s translation, ‘ne weneð þæt him þæs edhwyrft cyme’ (43b) becomes ‘cannot hope for change’ (p. 155 note). But clearly the poet does not say that: the hopelessness is part of the blind man’s suffering because he expects no change. From his Christian perspective, however, the poet knows that the pure in heart shall see God. The full passage reads:

Blipe sceal bealoleas heorte. Blind sceal his eagna þolian,
oftigen biþ him torhtre gesihþe. Ne magon hi tunglu bewitian,
swegltorht sunnan ne monan; þæt him biþ sar in his mode,
onge þonne he hit ana wat, ne weneð þæt him þæs edhwyrft
cyme.

Waldend him þæt wite teode, se him mæg wyrpe syllan,
hælo of heafodgimme, gif he wat heortan clæne.

(39-44)

(Happy is the innocent in heart. The blind man is deprived of
his eyes—clear vision is taken from him—they cannot see the

stars bright in the sky, or the the sun and moon. That is painful to him in his mind, a source of anxiety because he alone knows what it is like, and he expects no change. The Lord ordained that suffering for him, and he can grant him relief, healing for the eye, if he knows him to be pure in heart.)

One of the poet's habits is to create vignettes by expanding a phrase, and Biggs and McEntire have identified the source of this passage as Matthew 5. 8, 'beati mundo corde quoniam ipsi Deum videbunt'. What the latter writers have not observed is that 39a is the slightly free rendition of the Matthew verse, which the rest of the passage expands and recapitulates. Biggs and McEntire wish to see wite in line 43a as 'punishment', a spiritual blindness resulting from the Fall (p. 11), but I suspect this is not the case, and that the reference here is to the story of the healing of the man born blind in John 9. 1-12. There is a debate as to why the man was blind, which Jesus resolves with the words,

Neque hic peccavit, neque parentes ejus; sed ut manifestentur
opera Dei in illo.

Me oportet operari opera ejus qui misit me, donec dies est;
venit nox, quando nemo potest operari.

Quamdiu sum in mundo, lux sum mundi. (3-5)

The Maxims poet ascribes the suffering to God, but also the remedy, much as does Jesus. Whereas the suffering is physical and mental, the remedy is spiritual: the vision of God is the healing of all ills, and only those who are

pure in heart shall see God.

Even a superficial review of the context and content of the blind man passage shows Remly to be mistreating the text. There are undoubtedly disjunctions of both style and content in the poems, but that cannot justify the procedure of tendentious selection. Moreover, if there is this biblical element in the passage, the poet is expecting a high level of Christian education among his audience: once again, the archaic, elemental, 'sacred experience' evaporates, and we simply have effective, emotive, Christian poetry. The point is not worth labouring, but despite her references to works of comparative religion, Remly is most heavily influenced by Romantic theories of poetry, and most of her ideas would find themselves in congenial company in Wordsworth's Preface to Lyrical Ballads.

Gruber, for his part, is more post-modern than Romantic. His procedure is to impose an abstract interpretation on certain passages and then to observe how this generates dissonances in the contexts. The key to Gruber's interpretative strategy seems to be that 'the Anglo-Saxon writer sensed strong connections between natural and supernatural realities' (p. 29), and consequently the description of the seasons in the second section of Maxims I (71 f.), for example, is really about human life (p. 30). These 'connections' Gruber calls 'homologies'. When, therefore, in Maxims II 14-32a, we read a catalogue of nouns collocated with their locations, Gruber wishes to see a list of 'homologies':

Many of these lines, upon first reading, seem to have an esoteric import. Insofar as hawks, bears, boars, and dragons were totemic analogues to the brave earl and the generous king, the human qualities may still be metaphorically suggested by those animals when the deeper connections are forgotten or suppressed. The king, a dragon guarding his hoard; the courageous earl, a fierce boar; the wise, kindly, but intrepid king, an honoured and awesome bear: symbolism of this nature, of course, is pagan. The remark that "God shall be in Heaven, judge of deeds" (ll. 35b-36a), however, does little to Christianize it or its context. And, to the extent that the whole of Maxims II is an aesthetic appropriation of older religious statements, the symbolism loses its archaic significance. It becomes, upon second reading, a mere description of natural and human activities. (p. 38)

It is hard not to see this 'first reading' as an elaborate joke, reaching its comic climax with the assertion that animal symbolism is (of course) pagan. Jacob's sons in Genesis 49 are variously a lion cub, a donkey, a snake, a doe and a wolf; later in the Bible there is the Lamb of God. And when the catalogue is read as something it patently is not, of course the reference to God 'does little to Christianize it'; but Gruber overlooks the inconvenient fact that even if there are these 'homologies' between the animals and humans, there are other items listed in the catalogue, in the same form, which might tax even the most vivid imagination as 'homologies'—the mast or the jewel or the river.

In relation to the opening lines of Maxims I, Gruber raises the question of ‘the relative degree of [...] immanence or transcendence of the divinity’ (p. 31). He continues,

"God us ece bið" [sic] (l. 8b) may be translated inter alia either "God, for us, is eternal" or "God is with us eternally." If He is eternal for, that is, in respect to, us, the separation of the mortal and immortal realms suggested in lines 7-8a is further reinforced. If, on the other hand, the divine being is with or among us eternally, His immanence then, not to mention His immunity from the vicissitudes of mortal fate, described in lines 9-12a, contradicts the preceding sceal gnome.

(p. 31, Gruber's emphasis)

Gruber generates a contradiction in the poem by demanding that it answer a question with which it is not concerned, by imposing a bizarre (though not entirely impossible) translation upon the line, and by detaching the lines from their context. Lines 4b-13 simply contrast humanity and God:

God sceal mon ærest hergan

fægre, fæder userne, forþon þe he us æt frymþe geteode

lif ond lænne willan; he usic wile þara leana gemonian.

Meotud sceal in wuldre, mon sceal on eorþan

geong ealdian. God us ece biþ,

ne wendað hine wyrda ne hine wiht dreceþ.

adl ne ylde ælmihtigne;

ne gomelað he in gæste. ac he is gen swa he wæs.

þeoden gepyldig. He us geþonc syleð.

missenlicu mod, monge reorde.

(First of all, God our Father should fittingly be praised, because he ordained life and transient pleasures for us at the very beginning: he wishes to remind us of those gifts. The Lord dwells in glory, the young person on earth grows old. God is eternal to us: nothing that happens changes him, and nothing—neither disease nor age—afflicts the Almighty at all. He does not grow old in spirit, but he is even now as he was before, the patient Lord. He gives us minds, various dispositions, many languages.)

God is ageless and unchanging, dwelling in glory, the human race dwelling on earth and growing old, is the recipient of God's gifts, and appropriately should praise him. The lines are probably dependent on the Epistle of James 1. 17-18:

Omne datum optimum, et omne donum perfectum, desursum est, descendens a Patre luminum, apud quem non est transmutatio, nec vicissitudinis obumbratio.

Voluntarie enim genuit nos verbo veritatis, ut simus initium aliquod creaturae ejus.

There is no 'contradiction' in the lines if we read 'God us ece biþ' as introducing the changelessness of God, and this attempt to distinguish different epistemologies within the Maxims once more seems to be factitiously defying common sense.

There is little enough in these passages which I have discussed to suggest anything definably pagan. Sensitivity to context, structure, and possible sources, are all necessary if we are to avoid the subjectivity of these interpretations. Leaving aside the post-modern debate over the validity and objectivity of any interpretation, what these interpretations lack most crucially is evidence, whether from the text itself, or from other sources, for comparison. Since we know so little about the pagan Anglo-Saxon world view, we simply cannot be sure how pagans felt about natural phenomena, and whether it was markedly different from how Christian Anglo-Saxons felt. The thrust of what we do know, from Bede, Beowulf, Alcuin and other Christian sources, was that paganism was a delusion which either needed to be corrected or expunged.

PAGAN ASSOCIATIONS

The notion that animals are symbolic has already been mentioned. John D. Niles takes this a stage further, and sees boars, bears and dragons as 'totemic' (p. 131). The boar is peculiarly attractive to those fond of pagan associations because in Scandinavian mythology, 'boars were sacred to Freyr' (p. 131), and because Beowulf mentions boar-crests, and the Benty Grange helmet is evidence that there really were such things. Christine Fell discusses the whole issue of paganism in Beowulf, and this particular association of boar and paganism is soundly rebutted.⁸ However, Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson, in repeated editions of their Guide to Old English,⁹ use the Benty Grange helmet as the lynch-pin of their argument that paganism survives in

Old English principally in the form of the heroic code.

This is from Mitchell and Robinson's introductory remarks to the Dream of the Rood:

This, the earliest dream-vision poem in the English language, is the central literary document for understanding that resolution of competing cultures which was the presiding concern of the Christian Anglo-Saxons. The Germanic heroic tradition which the Anglo-Saxons brought with them to England celebrated courage, mastery, and aggressive action. The Christian outlook which the Anglo-Saxons in due course adopted stressed virtues like loving kindness and self-sacrifice. [...] Finding a proper adjustment of the two competing ideals was a constant spiritual struggle. The poet of The Dream of the Rood discovered in the central event of Christian history an opportunity for using his people's native poetic tradition to encompass and naturalize the alien ideals of the new faith.

(pp. 240-1)

For the main points of the first part, which refer to the 'competing cultures' and 'competing ideals' and 'spiritual struggle', referring to Christianity on the one hand and the 'Germanic heroic tradition' on the other, we can only say there is little evidence. This is where the Benty Grange helmet provides the focus for Mitchell and Robinson. Any poet in England between 680 and 850, they tell us,

lived in a society where the battle between pagan Germanic religions and Christianity had not been finally resolved. Early Christian poetry adapts pagan symbolism to its own use. This crucial ambivalence is seen in the Benty Grange helmet and in the Sutton Hoo ship burial, which could be a memorial either to the pagan King Rædwald or to one of his Christian successors. (p. 124)

Or again,

Conversion was neither universal nor immediate. But those who experienced it must have been a strange blend of pagan and Christian, combining as they did the fierce courage and pride of paganism with the new hope derived from Christianity—a blend strikingly seen on the Benty Grange helmet which bears both the pagan boar and the Christian cross. (p. 139)

Many of these assertions taken on their own are not unreasonable, but in the last quotation can be seen the line of argument which develops into the notion that the heroic is pagan: courage, pride and aggressive action are Germanic and pagan, and hope, loving kindness and self-sacrifice are Christian; and there must have been competition between (or perhaps blending of) these ideals. This ignores the facts that on the one hand Tacitus tells us that willingness for self-sacrifice and love of one's lord were fundamental to the Germanic heroic code, and on the other, that Christianity was a militant

religion. The Benty Grange helmet and The Dream of the Rood alike show how readily Christianity assimilated the pre-Christian heroic notions and furnishings into its larger purposes. The Seafarer 72-80a shows how easily poets could develop heroic maxims into ones with spiritual import.

In view of the fact that many of the most distinctive maxims in Old English narrative poetry are heroic, it is perhaps worth emphasising the heroic aspect of the early medieval Christian world view. One of the dominant modes of imagery in the Bible is the martial: 'Dominus quasi vir pugnator' (Exodus 15. 3); the Christian is a miles Christi, and must put on God's armour for the battle. In the early Church, Christianity assimilated more martial imagery: the sacramentum, for example, was, as well as the sacrament, a military oath of allegiance; the great processional crosses still used today were in origin the labarum, the standard of the Roman legion which preceded the soldiers to battle;¹⁰ when (according to legend) St Helena found the True Cross in 326, she took the nails and made of them a diadem, a bridle, and a spear or sword—all symbols of military and imperial power (Swanton, p. 43). One of the influences on the Dream of the Rood is that of Latin hymnology: Venantius Fortunatus's hymn Vexilla Regis sees the cross as Christ's battle standard. Well-known in Anglo-Saxon England, too, was the tradition of saints serving in armies in their youth: the great Frankish Saint Martin did, Saint Oswald, king of Northumbria, who died in 642, also was a soldier; Saint Guðlac was also a military man in his youth. And needless to say, the most Christian king of Anglo-Saxon England, King Ælfred, spent

the better part of his life fighting. Bede's letter to Archbishop Ecgberht deplores the fact that monasteries (especially false ones) were now so common and so powerful that they engrossed the land that would otherwise have been given to pensioned-off warriors by the king.¹¹ Bede felt that monasteries were in this case undermining the social fabric by denying the rewards that were reasonably to be expected by heroes for their heroic labours. And in his story of the conversion of Northumbria, the action of Coifi in desecrating the 'temple' at Goodmanham, which is claimed to be a pagan sacral act,¹² may show no more than the fact that Bede, if not Coifi, associated conversion with freedom to bear and use arms; and there is the peculiar force and appropriateness of the former servant of pagan gods being the one to desecrate the 'temple'. The opposition of heroic and Christian, then, is entirely false. Some fought to live, others lived to fight: this was almost a condition of life in the early Middle Ages in Europe. There can be no assumption that heroic maxims are pre-Christian as they appear in Old English literature.

A PRE-CHRISTIAN EXPRESSION?

In 1991, when my son was five years old, he was very fond of nursery rhymes. It also happened to be the time of the Gulf War, and this is what I heard him singing:

I had a little nut-tree
And nothing would it bear
But a silver nutmeg
And a golden pear.

King Hussein of Jordan

Came to visit me

And all for the sake

Of my little nut-tree.

There have been many assertions that maxims have been Christianised. In his review of Williams, Bernhard Fehr made the following suggestion:

So prägte der pyle eine menge münzen, die von hand zu hand liefen. Das volk übernahm sie, aber auch die dichtung griff instinktiv nach diesen ethischen wertsymbolen, um sie ihren werken einzuverleben. War das bilt verwischt, so wurde es neu, oft besser eingezeichnet.¹³

The problem is, of course, that in the vast majority of cases in Old English we do not have the original King of Spain's daughter, or the original minted verbal coinage with which to compare the versions that we do have, and most of the supposed parallels are far from convincing.

One maxim in Beowulf has a close parallel in Andreas, or at least close enough for many editors to note it. The expressions are:

Wyrd oft nereð

unfægne eorl þonne his ellen deah.

(Bwf 572b-73)

(Fate often spares the undoomed warrior when his courage holds out.)

And:

Forþan ic eow to soðe secgan wille,
 þæt næfre forlæteð lifgende god
 eorl on eorðan, gif his ellen deah.

(And 458-60)

(Therefore I wish to tell you as a truth, that the living God
 never abandons any warrior on earth if his courage holds out.)

Apart from the observation of similarity in the phrasing, little further is said by the editors. Klaeber noted that the maxim in Beowulf is ‘A proverbial saying [...]. Frequently God is substituted for fate’ (p. 151). He gives a reference to Gummere’s Germanic Origins where the writer stated simply, ‘Wyrd, (in Beowulf) the fate-goddess, has been changed to suit the new faith; but the essentials of the old epic phrase are there.’¹⁴ Williams, a few years after Gummere, also stated quite baldly that ‘Andreas 458-60 is a Christianized form [...] of Beowulf 572’ (p. 37 note 2). What these comments amount to, is the suggestion that the two expressions are slightly different versions of the same maxim, and that a process of change has gone on in the Andreas version to make it more Christian than the Beowulf one. Precisely what that change was needs to be explored more fully, giving due attention to the factors mentioned earlier, namely sensitivity to context, structure and sources.

The Germanic background of the maxim has been much commented on. In a note on the passage later excised by W. F. Bolton, C. L. Wrenn wrote, ‘the treatment of Wyrd in such passages has a remarkable flavour of

the intermingling of Christian and Germanic pagan ideas'.¹⁵ Wrenn also referred to line 455b, 'Gæð a wyrd swa hio scel' (things turn out as they must), which 'expresses only simple fatalism' (p. 196). What I deduce from this, and from Bolton's editing, is that Wrenn conceived that because the language retained wyrd as an apparently personal subject, of which the actions are predicated, there must lie behind it in the Beowulf poet's mind a pagan notion of the deity of fate. But in neither of these contexts does Beowulf claim a great deal for the influence of wyrd. The latter remark modestly admits the difficulty of the enterprise against Grendel and its potential cost, but says in effect, 'We shall see'; and Burton Raffel's translation of the longer maxim, 'Fate saves the living when they drive away death by themselves' captures well the sense of the first maxim.¹⁶ A modern instance which reflects some of the tensions of the Beowulf passage might be that of the golfer who, when accused of being lucky, replied, 'The more I practise, the luckier I get.'

The emphasis here is on Beowulf's courage, and at the core of the maxim in 572b-73, there is the recognition of the need for courage in a heroic society. This is explicit in the collocation of eorl (noble warrior) and ellen (courage), found here, and in the Andreas parallel, as well as in Maxims II 16a, 'ellen sceal on eorle' (courage is characteristic of the warrior), and elsewhere. Underlying the collocation is the notion of congruity of status and behaviour. The notion pervades the heroic literature of the Germanic races, where there are many parallels to the final adverbial clause, 'þonne / gif his

ellen deah' (when / if his courage holds). This formula occurs in Riddle 73 9, as well as in the Continental Saxon Hildebrandslied 55, 'ibu dir din ellen taoc' (if your courage is good). With a different noun alliterating, we find the formula in the Old Norse Atlamál st. 49, 'sem þeim hugr dygði' ('as valour gave them strength', Dronke, p. 86). And, in prose, Grettis Saga cap. 19 has 'munu eigi bila vápnin ef þer dugir hugrinn' (the weapons will not fail you if your courage does not).¹⁷ There is also a Germanic formula-system, where there is some emphasis on the essential congruity of thought and action: Beowulf's reference to Unferð's agile mind, 'þeah þin wit duge' (589b, though your wit is good), may be paralleled in form and meaning by 'ef þitt œði dugir' (if your mind holds good) in Vafþrúðnismál st. 20 and 22.¹⁸ The poet of Andreas evidently shared the thought-world and poetic resources of Beowulf to the extent that he could reproduce this formula. But that similarity serves to emphasise the contrasts between the other elements in the maxims in the two poems.

The primary contrast between the two maxims is that the Andreas maxim is explicitly Christian, and has a distinctly biblical flavour. There are several possibilities which might explain the latter fact. For example, the poet was familiar with the Bible and was working with pseudo-biblical sources; or that the poem is commonly understood to be a translation of a Latin version of the Greek legend of St Andrew, and his source might have supplied him with a similar expression. Krapp remarked that 'the Greek [...] has nothing corresponding to 460b [...]'. Perhaps the poet may have had in mind,

however, Psalm XXXVII, 25 ff., and similar passages.¹⁹ Krapp did not have the benefit of knowing the Casanatensis Latin version of the Andrew legend.²⁰ If, as Brooks suggests,²¹ something like the Casanatensis Latin version lies behind Andreas, it would seem that the Old English poet conflated two exhortations of the saint. The first comes before the story of the calming of Galilee,

filioli mei viriliter agite et confortetur cor vestrum [...] non enim dominus derelinquet servos suos, omnesque sperant in eum.

(Blatt, p. 49)

(My sons, act like men and be strong of heart ... for the Lord will not desert his servants and all those who hope in Him, Calder and Allen, p. 20.)

And the second comes after the story, where the Old English maxim occurs,

Nunc autem filioli mei, ne timeatis, non enim ipse dominus noster derelinquet nos.

(Blatt, p. 51)

(Now, my children, don't be afraid, for our Lord will not desert us, Calder and Allen, p. 20)

Krapp's suggested parallel, Psalm 37. 28, 'Dominus [...] non derelinquet sanctos suos' has clear relevance to the first passage in the Casanatensis version. The remaining exhortations can be paralleled from passages such as Deuteronomy 31. 6-8; Joshua 1. 5-7 and I Chronicles 28. 20, 'Viriliter agite, et confortamini; nolite timere [...] quia Dominus Deus tuus ipse est ductor tuus, et non demittet, nec derelinquet te'. Clearly, then, the Latin in contrast to the Greek, does have something parallel to line 460b, though the Old

English transforms the imperatives of the Latin into the generalisation and indirectness characteristic of maxims.

Throughout Old English, forlæteð is the word normally used in rendering derelinquet, as in the Blickling prose version of the St Andrew legend, which has at this juncture (Morris, p. 235),²² ‘Nu þonne, min bearn, ne ondrædað ge eow, forþon þe ure God us ne forlæteþ’ (Now then, my children, do not be afraid, because our God will not abandon us). Both Old English versions put the emphasis on the reliability and faithfulness of God, who will never abandon his people. In this they reflect the emphasis of the biblical passages to which reference has been made above. But the poet of Andreas used the Germanic formula ‘gif his ellen deah’ to give prominence to the other element in the equation, courage and perseverance on the part of God’s people. It follows that the Old English poet was not simply substituting God for wyrd in a proverbial saying, but was probably following his source or his biblical understanding at this point, recasting the maxim entirely to capture both the biblical and the heroic aspects.

Some heroic aspects of the maxim as it appears in Beowulf, however, were not appropriate to the Andreas poet’s purpose. Gummere gives the Andreas maxim a kind of bogus heroic flavour in his translation in Germanic Origins:

Therefore sooth will I say to you:—never leaveth the living

God eorl to his doom if he doughty be.

(p. 236, Gummere's emphasis)

The phrase 'eorl to his doom' is a fabrication which minimises the difference between the the passage in Beowulf and its counterpart in Andreas. The Andreas poet seems to be playing down the precise denotation of eorl by collocating it with on eorðan (on earth), thereby generalising the application of the maxim. With this generalising tendency goes a tendency to be more categorical. At every point—with one exception—Andrew's maxim is more definite than Beowulf's. The vagueness of oft (often) and unfæge (undoomed) is replaced with firm statement, as well as wyrd being replaced by God. Represented schematically, the terms contrast thus:

wyrd	>	lifgende god
oft	>	næfre forlæteð
unfægne eorl	>	eorl on eorðan
þonne	>	gif

The point at which Beowulf's maxim is more definite than Andrew's is this point of ellen. The Beowulf poet uses the conjunction þonne in the final clause, and the expectation is that courage, as part of the very nature of the eorl, will assert itself in a crisis at some stage. By contrast, the fixed point of Andrew's maxim is the promise of God's intervention, with ellen on the part of men being only one of the conditions, as the conjunction gif intimates. That ellen is probably not of the greatest importance is demonstrated by the fact that Andrew's retainers promptly fall asleep after

hearing the maxim. Beowulf's maxim is another modest circumlocution explaining his bravery; Andrew's maxim is an uncompromising statement of faith.

The introduction to Andrew's maxim has clear biblical overtones, as well as the core:

Forþan ic eow to soðe secgan wille

þæt [...]

(Therefore I wish to tell you as a truth that ...)

This would undoubtedly bring to mind Christ's words when he made his great authoritative statements in the Sermon on the Mount. In the Vulgate the phrases used are 'Amen dico vobis', 'dico enim vobis', 'ego autem dico vobis' etc. (Matthew 5. 18, 26; 6. 2, 5, 16 etc.). In the Anglo-Saxon Gospels the usual rendering of 'Amen' here is by some variant of soðe, soðelice. So Matthew 5. 20 reads: 'Soplice ic secge eow [...]' (truly I say to you).²³ The Andreas poet gives biblical emphasis to his maxim by this means. The term lifgende god (living God), another biblical expression, adds to this. It occurs frequently in the Bible, but several times where it carries particular emphasis, for example, Peter's confession of Christ in Matthew 16. 16; and Caiaphas's demand from Christ, on oath, that he declare himself, Matthew 16. 63. In Old English the term appears in the liturgical and biblical poems. There is another example of the usage in Andreas at line 1409, where with perhaps unconscious irony it refers to Christ on the cross. So, although the maxim in Andreas draws on the style and vocabulary of heroic poetry, it is given

Christian content, a Christian context and biblical emphasis.

Considered on their own these maxims from Beowulf and Andreas show evident signs of being parallel, if quite different in emphasis. There is a close correspondence of terms, the same maxim form of expression and the nearly identical half line at the end. But is there any reason to suppose that the poet of Andreas knew the maxim from Beowulf, and was substituting terms and correcting, generalising and making more pious an already existing maxim in the secular poem? There are two shreds of evidence which might be adduced in support of this, but first the proverbial nature of maxims needs to be registered. Given the strength of oral tradition and the power of memory that was cultivated among the Anglo-Saxons, we do not have to assume that a written text of Beowulf was in front of the Andreas poet as he was composing. Nor, in explaining the parallelism between the two maxims, do we even have to assume that Beowulf in the form we have it was known to the Andreas poet. The maxim form was the common property of both poets and their audience; it is quite possible that maxims similar to the forms in Beowulf were in popular circulation, and remained current for many years. Consideration of the maxims alone will not resolve the issue of the relation between the two poems, but it may add something to the growing body of opinion and analysis which suggests dependence of some kind of Andreas on Beowulf.²⁴

If, as Klaeber suggested, God was frequently substituted for wyrd,

what motivated the substitution? That either of the poets thought of wyrd as a pagan goddess is unimaginable, not least because the Andreas poet uses wyrd on six occasions in his poem, lines 613b, 630b, 758b, 1056a, 1480b, and 1561b, where the general sense is 'the way things turn out'. But the poet might have been offended at the secularity or even the vulgarity of the use of wyrd as it appears in the maxim, since it is noticeable that whenever he uses the word in the nominative singular (613, 758, 1561) he always gives it the article seo, thus making clear that he is using the concept in a nonpersonal, generalised sense. There are still scrupulous people who avoid using such expressions as gosh, heck, crikey, blimey, strewth, for what I would think to be basically similar reasons: a sense (not necessarily informed by historical linguistic research or religious sensitivities)²⁵ that such expressions are common, profane and hence taboo.²⁶ At any rate, it is clear that the poet of Andreas did not choose to use wyrd as the Beowulf did, and the substitution theory makes sense of the data we have in the two maxims.

In view of Anita Riedinger's work on the thematic overtones of the formula, and the evident fact that the two maxims in focus at present share a well-evidenced formulaic expression, it is worth exploring the formulaic context further. Both maxims are elicited by a crisis at sea, where deep inner resources are needed to persevere in the face of peril. But whereas the emphasis is heavily on courage in the Beowulf maxim, ellen is not crucial in the Andreas context, though the source probably gave some prominence to courage, as has been shown. Every one of the other cited examples of the

ellen deah formulas and their parallels refers to battle or personal conflict. So, as far as can be ascertained from the fragmentary condition of Riddle 73, the formula there refers to a spear being used in battle by its owner; Hildebrand sorrowfully taunts his son Hadubrand suggesting that an old man such as himself will be easy meat in combat for the young man if his courage holds. In the Atlamál, Gunnarr and Hogni fought, outnumbered, ‘as valour gave them strength’; and in Grettis Saga, Þorfinn’s wife assures Grettir that the weapons she directs him to use against the gang of berserks will not fail if his courage does not. Similarly, the wit / æði formulas seem to refer to verbal battles. Beowulf’s reply to Unferð is deeply scathing, consigning him to hell despite his mental qualities. Machan comments on Vafþrúðnismál,

A comparison may be drawn here with the Old English Beowulf, where Beowulf must first pass the test of Unferth, [...] before he is allowed to confront Grendel. [...] It should also be noted here that the competitive nature of Óðinn and Vafþrúðnir’s meeting is emphasised throughout this section [...]

(p. 35)

The Beowulf maxim perfectly exemplifies this strong association between the ellen deah formula and personal conflict. The poem continues:

Hwæþere me gesealde, þæt ic mid sweorde ofsloh
 niceras nigene. No ic on niht gefrægn
 under heofones hwealf heardran feohtan.

(574-76)

(Yet it was granted to me that I killed nine water-monsters with

my sword. I have never heard of a harder night-fight under the over-arching sky).

There is, then, only a superficial resemblance between the Andreas context and the invariable thematic context of the other ellen deah formulas, and the formula-system to which it relates.

What is perhaps significant is the fact that the details of the wider Beowulf context are to some extent replicated in Andreas. Following Andrew's exhortation, and reiterating the pattern of his story of his Lord's calming of the sea of Galilee, the sea subsided, mere sweoðerade (465b). Beowulf's maxim is given as a comment on his survival in the fight against the sea-monsters: there, too, the waters subsided, brimu swaþredon (570b). It seems possible that the explanation for this pattern of divergence from the formulaic norm, and strong contextual similarity between Beowulf and Andreas, may be that the Andreas maxim is a spiritual redaction of the Beowulf one, where the poet has not only replaced the secular elements point for point, but has also responded to the contextual prompt of Beowulf, namely the sea crisis, rather than the personal conflict more usually associated with the ellen deah formula. In other words, it is possible that the poet of Andreas knew Beowulf well enough to link Beowulf's wyrd maxim with a context of a crisis and its resolution at sea, thus prompting his own Christian redaction of the maxim after his story of the calming of the Sea of Galilee.

Even after an extensive ramble through the gardens of source and

redaction criticism, examining biblical and formulaic specimens, and speculating on common roots and cross-fertilisation, we emerge with little enough that is definite, and certainly nothing that is pagan. But I think there are grounds for the assertion that Andreas 458-60 is, if not a Christianisation, then a spiritualisation of the maxim that is found in Beowulf 572b-73.

A BIT OF OLD LORE PRESERVED?

Runes and the Rune Poems, because of the popular association of runes with magic, have often been the focus of paganising interpretations. The similarities between some of the lore recorded in the various Germanic Rune Poems has led some scholars to posit a common source.²⁷ A reasonable statement is that the use of runes pre-dated Christianity in both England and Scandinavia, and that some of the runes had etymologically-related names which gave rise to associations that were explored in the poems much later. But the theory that there was a Germanic Ur-poem may rely as much on the editions used by modern scholars as the evidence of the manuscripts. The editions tend to imply a more monolithic tradition than such manuscripts as we have. The Old English Rune Poem is earliest found in Hickes: he may have been a careful editor, but his work can no longer be checked.²⁸ From an examination of the manuscripts of the Icelandic Rune Poem, Ray Page believes that the two texts, AM 687d 4° and AM 461 12°,

cannot be certainly traced to a common archetype. Though there are close resemblances and common readings, there are too many essential differences. [...] It seems more as though

each is an independent (more or less) creation based on a common fund of wording, and the wording comes from a collection of alliterating kennings that expound the letter-names. [...] Luckily there survive, though from a comparatively late date, examples of such collections of kennings for the rune-names. They appear under headings such as Málrúnar ok þrídeilur, and often refer, not to the restricted sixteen-letter futhork, but to the later, extended rune-row, and are usually [...] in alphabetical order.²⁹

There is just one feature that is shared by the fragmentary evidence that we have of the Rune Poems, and that is the gnomic form of expression which links the rune or rune-name with the explanatory matter. In the Old English poem the first line of each ‘stanza’ is the essentially gnomic part. It usually relates the rune name to its characteristic, and that combination to human experience. These three elements often carry the alliteration of the line:

(feoh) [...] frofur [...] fira gehwylcum (1)

(þorn) [...] ðearle scearp [...] ðegna gehwylcum (7)

(rad) [...] on recyde [...] rinca gehwylcum (13)

(cen) [...] cwicera gehwam [...] cuþ (16)

(gyfu) [...] gumena [...] gleng (19)

and so on. These elements, along with the existential verb, form the kernel of the lore. The Icelandic poem uses the present tense er invariably to link the rune name with its characteristic;³⁰ the Norwegian poem uses er eleven

times, vældr twice, and kollum, kveða and gerer once each. The Old English poem uses byþ regularly, except at line 22 bruceþ, line 41 hæfþ, and line 67 wæs. The last, used in the ‘stanza’ which refers to Ing, is the only time that the rune lore is connected to the rune name with a preterite verb:

Ing wæs ærest mid East-Denum
 gesewen secgun, oþ he siððan est
 ofer wæg gewat; wen æfter ran;
 Ðus Heardingas ðone hæle nemdum.

(67-70)

(Ing was first seen by men among the East-Danes, before he went away east over the sea, followed by his cart. That was what the Heardingas called the hero.)

The existence of a very strong tradition of expression, with an almost mathematically predictable relationship of the parts in a gnome or maxim, makes the absence of one such predictable element all the more noticeable. The gnome is a key device in the Rune Poems: it links the rune names with their characteristics, and it forms the catalogue poems overall. Such comparative material as there is marks the use of the past tense wæs in the Old English Rune Poem as anomalous.³¹ Moreover the lore recorded in the stanza is apparently a garbled account of the trappings of the cult of Ing alias Yngvi-Freyr, alias Fróði, alias Nerthus, alias Njorðr. The connections between these different but related persons and deities are explored by Turville-Petre,³² and the conclusion of most scholars is that the poem records

a genuine pre-Christian tradition.

What the poet has apparently done is to record the information about Ing as if he were a hero (Niles, p. 135, Halsall, p. 147), the eponymous ancestor of the Ingwine and part of the genealogical furniture of Anglo-Saxon poetry, rather than a fertility deity who travelled annually round the country in a wagon, bestowing peace and plenty. Thinking of Ing as a hero from the past, the poet has put the lore in the past tense. This fact undermines the alternative explanation offered by Marijane Osborn, that the Ing stanza refers to the constellation Boötes: if, as she suggests Ing 'is Boötes in his fiercer aspect, first seen (each night) among the Danes in the east, the following his Wain over the sea (to the west)',³³ then as it is a regular occurrence the poet would put the lore in the present tense. But the poet breaks the convention and uses the past tense.

On occasion, the poet interacts with his material: he feels obliged to voice an opinion almost opposite to that expressed in the gnomic proposition. In lines 2, 27 and 60, for example, he introduces this dissent with (sceal) beah, and all three examples give Christian eschatological reasons for not taking the rune lore as absolute. The first damps enthusiasm for wealth, the second finds solace in suffering, and the third laments the mortality of humankind. Viewing these things sub specie aeternitatis counteracts what the poet might have thought of as the reckless pleasure or hopeless despair encapsulated in the lore. This might suggest that as with the Ing lore, the

rune-names were linked by alliteration with an explanatory expression or longer explanatory material, much as Page has suggested the Icelandic runes were. The poem was probably composed with two aims in mind: the preservation of the rune names and their phonetic values; and the spiritual and moral education of whatever audience the poem might have had. Ing is a difficult concept to explain without recourse to the sort of lore that the poet uses, and 'ng' is a difficult phonetic value to record without recourse to the name Ing or a longer and less obvious word. So the poet might well have been constrained by the tradition he knew, and have recorded the lore without fully understanding its associations.

SUMMARY

Maxims and gnomes, as proverbial expressions, might be expected to retain some evidence of pre-Christian use and conceptions. Proverbs and proverbial sayings in use now frequently make reference to obscure and obsolete customs, language and traditions: 'a dog in the manger', 'Mony a mickle maks a muckle', 'to mind one's P's and Q's' and so on.³⁴ What the evidence of the maxims suggests is that the conversion of Anglo-Saxon England was remarkably effective in terms of the recorded literature. Since the Church had a practical monopoly of education and the means of writing, almost nothing that can be called pagan remains in the literature. What does remain is merely garbled tradition, which can only be seen as pagan by a process of reconstruction. I have gone as far as seems to me reasonable in reconstruction by attempting to understand what might have been the attitude

of the poet of Andreas to a current maxim like the one found in Beowulf, and by responding to a structural anomaly in the Old English Rune Poem. Apart from these, I have found little to encourage speculation as to pagan origins in the maxims. Much in the corpus is secular, some things are pre-Christian, but paganism is elusive in the extreme.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 6

1. (Cambridge: Brewer, 1975).
2. For example, John D. Niles, 'Pagan Survivals and Popular Belief' in The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature, ed. by Malcolm Godden and Michael Lapidge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 126-41 (pp. 131-32).
3. The Poetical Dialogues of Solomon and Saturn, Modern Language Association of America: Monograph Series, 13 (London: Oxford University Press, 1941).
4. Williams's and Menner's line-numbering is different from the ASPR VI edition.
5. John M. Kemble, The Dialogue of Solomon and Saturnus, with an Historical Introduction (London: Ælfric Society, 1848), emended the manuscript's for ildo, p. 167. See also Menner, p. 135 note.
6. Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe, 'Source, Method, Theory, Practice: On Reading Two Old English Verse Texts', Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester, 76 (1994), 51-73, shows Menner's dependence on Kemble and points out the sharp difference between his introduction's 'historical fantasy of remote origins' and the textual notes, where 'the great majority of information, textual commentary and suggestions for sources, lies in Latin commentary' (p. 64).

7. Lynn L. Remly, 'The Anglo-Saxon Gnomes as Sacred Poetry', Folklore, 82 (1971), 147-58; Loren C. Gruber, 'The Agnostic Anglo-Saxon Gnomes: Maxims I and II, Germania, and the Boundaries of Northern Wisdom', Poetica (Tokyo), 4 (1976), 22-47.
8. 'Paganism in Beowulf: A Semantic Fairy-Tale', in Pagans and Christians: The Interplay Between Christian Latin and Traditional Germanic Cultures in Early Medieval Europe, ed. by T. Hofstra, L. A. R. Houwen and A. A. MacDonald, Germania Latina, 2 (Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1995), pp. 9-34 (pp. 24-25).
9. References are to the 4th edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986; repr. 1988), but the wording is unchanged in the 5th edn (1994).
10. See The Dream of the Rood, ed. by Michael Swanton (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1970; rev. edn Exeter: University of Exeter, 1987), p. 42.
11. 'Epistola Bede ad Ecgbertum Episcopum', in Venerabilis Baedae: Opera Historica, ed. by Charles Plummer, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1896; repr. 1946), I, 405-23, particularly chapter 11.
12. J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People: A Historical Commentary, Oxford Medieval Texts (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), expresses doubt that 'Bede would have known' that "the action of the pagan priest Coifi in flinging his spear into the temple [...] is a small but highly significant pointer to the cult of Woden and the knowledge of his mythology at that time" (p. 72), quoting Henry Mayr-Harting, The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England (London:

Batsford, 1972), p. 26. The sentence from Mayr-Harting is unchanged in the 3rd ed. of 1991. Fell, p. 10, to whom I owe these references, points out the unreliable and late nature of the parallels.

13. Anglia Beiblatt, 26 (1915), 21-23 (p. 22).
14. Germanic Origins: A Study in Primitive Culture (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1892), p. 236.
15. Beowulf: With the Finnesburg Fragment, ed. by C. L. Wrenn (London: Harrap, 1953), p. 196. In the rev. edn by W. F. Bolton (London: Harrap, 1973), p. 119, the long note is omitted.
16. Beowulf: A New Translation, (New York: Mentor, 1963), p. 41.
17. Ed. by Guðni Jónsson, Íslenzk Fornrit, 7 (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1936), p. 67.
18. Ed. by Tim William Machan, Durham Medieval Texts, 6 (Durham, 1988).
19. Andreas and the Fates of the Apostles: Two Anglo-Saxon Narrative Poems (Boston: Ginn, 1906), p. 106.
20. Ed. by Franz Blatt, Die lateinischen Bearbeitungen der Acta Andreae et Matthiae apud Anthropophagos, Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaften, Beiheft 12 (Geissen and Copenhagen, 1930).
21. Andreas and the Fates of the Apostles (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), p. xviii.
22. The Blickling Homilies, ed. by R. Morris, EETS OS, 58, 63 and 73 (London: Oxford University Press, 1874-80; repr. 1967).
23. The Old English Version of the Gospels, ed. by R. M. Liuzza, EETS OS, 304 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 9. This edition prints

Corpus Christ College, Cambridge 140.

24. My article, 'Beowulf and Andreas: Two Maxims', Neophilologus, 77 (1993), 479-87, of which this material is a much modified version, perhaps tried to make more of this line of enquiry than the evidence would bear. The discussion in Brooks, pp. xxii-xxvii is sound, and the article by David Hamilton, 'Andreas and Beowulf: Placing the Hero', in Nicholson and Frese, pp. 81-98, is stimulating. L. J. Peters, 'The Relationship of the Old English Andreas to Beowulf', PMLA, 66 (1951), 844-63 is the main dissenting voice, arguing that most of the proposed similarities between the two poems can be accounted for by close attention to the Greek sources. My argument that this particular maxim fulfils one of Peters' criteria for dependence, 'that the Andreas poet altered his own source to effect a similarity with Beowulf' (p. 851) stands.

25. For the origins of these expressions in mild blasphemy, see The Penguin Dictionary of Historical Slang, ed. by Eric Partridge, abridged by Jacqueline Simpson (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972; repr. 1978), s.v.

26. Ælfred's insistence on equating wyrd with God's fulfilled will and providence (foreðonc) in chapter 39 of the Consolatio Philosophiae (Sedgefield, pp. 127-28), might at least hint that he is trying to spiritualise a concept with which he is uneasy.

27. Among whom are Rene Derolez, Runica Manuscripta: The English Tradition, Rijksuniversiteit te Gent: Werken uitgegeven door de Faculteit van de Wijsbegeerte en Letteren, 118 (Brugge: De Tempel, 1954): 'all three [Rune Poems] have, beside the general structure, a number of details in common.

which can only point to a common source, although the character of that source may be disputed' (p. xxvi).

28. Linguarum Veterum Septentionalium Thesaurus Grammatico-Criticus (Oxford, 1705). The Rune Poem is printed on p. 135; see also Fell. p. 17.

29. R. I. Page, 'The Icelandic Rune-Poem', draft of an unpublished article.

I am grateful to Professor Page for permission to refer to this.

30. Page's review of the manuscripts confirms this: where they can be read, and as far as they contain the material, er is invariably used to link the rune name with the lore.

31. The use of the past tense is noticed by various scholars: Maureen Halsall, The Old English Rune Poem: A Critical Edition, McMaster Old English Studies and Texts, 2 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), p. 147, and Paul Acker, 'The Old English Rune Poem and Formulaic Theory', Language and Style, 22 (1992), 149-65, p. 151. But the fact that it is unique in the rune poem corpus is missed.

32. E. O. G. Turville-Petre, Myth and Religion of the North: The Religion of Ancient Scandinavia (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1964), pp. 170-73.

33. 'Old English Ing and his Wain', NM, 81 (1980), 388-89 (p. 388).

34. Archer Taylor, 'The Study of Proverbs', Proverbium, 1 (1965), 3-11, discusses these and the explanations that have been given for the obscure elements (p. 5).

CHAPTER 7

THE OLD ENGLISH MAXIMS

The Maxims poems have attracted less critical interest than almost any Old English narrative poem, though in recent years the body of critical material has been growing. T. A. Shippey, an enthusiast for wisdom literature, gives as his honest appraisal of the poems the following:

For a modern reader the poems' charm often derives from their unfamiliar blend of the bold and the canny, the physical and the abstract, the banal and the suggestive. The question of the poems' original purpose remains. If they were intended as entertainment, one can only say that they neither amuse nor distract. If they were mnemonic poems, catalogues, then they have neither the completeness nor the ease of reference which one might hope for in such works. If they are didactic then they ought to come to firmer conclusions. It is hard to imagine them being sung in the meadhall, read in the refectory, or even set as an exercise in copying, all contexts which one might imagine for at least some Old English poems. The agreement of modern critics that the poems tell us a good deal about Anglo-Saxon England does not solve the problem, for it is evident that they tell us most about the natural and familiar assumptions of their authors, in a way that can hardly have been intended; they are 'a time-capsule' [...] only to us.

The problem of purpose is indeed the most baffling one in Old English poetic studies, and can only be considered speculatively (another deterrent to scholars). All that can be said for sure is that the gnomic poems, like the didactic poems generally, bear witness to a strong liking for setting out the fruits of experience in a direct and incontrovertible form; and that they aim at a definitive, even quasi-legal tone.

(PWL, pp. 18-19)

Shippey goes on to suggest that, taking a literary approach, the poems might be self-expressive 'in a modern fashion', or 'sportive tests' like riddles (p. 19).

The same puzzlement is expressed by another wisdom literature enthusiast, Elaine Tuttle Hansen, in the chapter of her book which is entitled 'A Wisdom Which Is Hidden':

to my mind [...] these texts remain the most difficult of all Old English wisdom poems, the least susceptible to my own twentieth-century methodology, the least reassuring to me that I have solved the puzzle of Old English wisdom literature. [...] The wisdom poem is above all open to interpretation: the gnomic poems, I will argue, epitomize the lesson that there is never a reading that puts an end to future readings.

(Solomon Complex, pp. 153-54)

Other fundamental questions about the sets of Maxims still cause problems. Are the poems so titled four poems or two? Are the sections a kind of 'stream-of-consciousness' (Dawson),¹ or 'assembled by the compiler more or less mechanically' (Krapp-Dobbie),² or do they tell a 'story' (Tigges),³ or do individual parts have 'a central subject' (McGillivray)?⁴ Are the sections assembled, compiled or written according to some principle (Barley)⁵ or are they merely unrelated sayings randomly grouped together? Definitive answers to these questions are hard to come by, despite some persuasive argument by proponents of the theories.

Perhaps it is best to acknowledge my own assumptions. I do not believe the Maxims are a story or allegory (Tigges pp. 114 f.) or usually metaphorical (Shippey, PWL, pp. 12-13); they are not narrative or logical, or coherent works of art in the normal sense (Greenfield and Evert, McGillivray); they are not a 'handbook of ritual' or a school exercise, again in the normal sense of the words (Taylor,⁶ Strobl,⁷ Williams, pp. 106-109); they are not collections of ancient lore interpolated and revised by monkish redactors (Williams passim, Malone,⁸ Larrington, p. 131); they are not magical, initiatory, incantatory, sacred or esoteric (Remly, Gruber, Hansen, Solomon Complex, p. 159, Schneider⁹); though in some ways related to riddles, they are not word-games or riddle answers (Shippey, PWL, p. 19, Hansen, Solomon Complex, p. 173). I believe that they are four poems, collections of sayings compiled and elaborated by the poets; they are poetic and purposive; they explore particular themes, they have elements of

structure; finally, (contra Shippey, above). I believe that they quite deliberately tell us about 'the natural and familiar assumptions' of the Anglo-Saxons. Some of these matters are harder to give evidence for than others, but a brief examination of style, structure and themes may go some way towards justifying my views; and then I will attempt to give a theoretical justification for the view that the poems do not lack a context for interpretation but in some sense constitute a context for interpretation of Old English poetry.

STYLE AND WISDOM

The 'problem' of the style of the Maxims poems is essentially a non-problem when they are compared with other wisdom collections. The poets knew, one may assume, Proverbs, Ecclesiasticus, and the related biblical material, Job, Ecclesiastes, the Wisdom of Solomon. They knew the Sermon on the Mount, which for all its familiarity, is basically a wisdom discourse, possibly abstracted as a collection of the essence of Jesus' teaching. They might well have known the Disticha (or Dicta) Catonis. The Sententiae of Publilius Syrus, collections of the sayings of the Fathers, commentaries on the biblical wisdom books, various kinds of florilegia, all circulated in the Middle Ages. Placed beside these, or the Hávamál, The Proverbs of Alfred, The Proverbs of Hending, indeed beside Hesiod, or Erasmus's Copia or Bacon's Ornamenta Rationalia, or La Rochefoucauld's Maximes, or dozens of other wisdom collections, the nature of the style becomes readily explicable. The problem is not so much the style of the Maxims, but our expectations of

‘coherence’ and ‘beauty’; and then not so much that the Maxims lack these features, but that we demand them in certain forms, and do not find them in the poems. Hansen’s book takes this background into account, but as the paragraph quoted from her chapter on the Maxims above suggests, she does not draw the radical conclusion that so far only Nicholas Howe has, namely, that ‘these poems have a structure adequate to their own, distinctive purpose—which is to offer a large number of maxims’ (p. 152).¹⁰ Howe concludes,

Any appraisal of these poems should [...] rest firmly on the quality of their short statements: are they illuminating? useful? affecting?

[The Maxims poems] continually defeat our expectations of development and order; they do not move progressively through their subject; and they do not build to an inevitable conclusion. (p. 165)

Various kinds of devices give form to the wisdom collections. In some cases it is merely the list structure of impersonal or imperative sentences, or the alphabetisation of the initial letter of the sentence, or the verse form of alliteration or rhyme, or the particular type of wisdom sentence. Some collections have refrains (‘quad hendyng’), some have numbering (Hávamál, and the Old English Precepts), some have keyword structures (the Beatitudes, The Sermon on the Mount, ‘Audistis quia dictum est antiquis [...] Ego autem dico vobis [...]’), some have parallelism or antithesis as a structural feature

within the smaller units (Proverbs). Some are instructions of the father to son, or teacher to pupil type (Cato, parts of Proverbs), some contain an embryonic narrative or dialogue form (Ecclesiastes), some are debates (Job, the Old English Solomon and Saturn, the Old Norse Vafþrúðnismál). There is, overall, a thematic concentration on moral and ethical issues, the wonders of the natural world, the question or assertion of God's (or the gods') involvement, the problems faced by people, particularly death and other people, the nature of wisdom itself, and the interaction of nature and nurture in the human personality.

Merely to note these things identifies the Maxims poems with a large body of literature for which there is no real modern counterpart in mainstream Western literature, and which consequently proves puzzling to the modern reader and exegete. The Maxims poems are alike in exploiting the alliterative verse-form, and with the exception of Maxims I part I, use the impersonal wisdom form nearly throughout. Maxims II has the catalogue of superlatives, the list of opposites, and the sceal on catalogue. Both sets of maxims consistently use the sceal and bið verbs (among others), and both use structures of opposition or contrast and parallelism. Maxims I part I, has an embryonic dialogue form, and all the poems have snatches of 'narrative' or thematic development. I consider the themes further below, but the similarity of the preoccupations of the Maxims with those of the other wisdom literature mentioned above is obvious. Observing these things, as I say, identifies the poems; and while it does not prevent us from searching for and finding

evidence of art in the compilation, it does suggest that the attempt to find a narrative, or allegory, or consistent and coherent 'logical' development is misguided. The style of wisdom literature, despite its atomistic assertiveness, is suggestive of connections; its coherence is as an outline of a world view.

SOURCES?

Wisdom literature is voracious in gathering and assimilating material. Nearly all the works cited above have either certainly or probably borrowed from other collections or authorities or popular tradition, and incorporated the material into their own framework. There is a limited but useful distinction between the catalogue and the collection, and most of the wisdom texts mentioned above are collections; The Fortunes of Men and The Gifts of Men in the Exeter Book are catalogues, and so are parts of Maxims II. The collections are often by nature borrowed material, whereas catalogues are often original material put together with some unifying pattern. It has been suggested that most of the Maxims poems consist of collections of material, and I have already given some evidence for thinking that the poems contain proverbial and biblical matter. The passage on the blind man in Maxims I 39-44 has been discussed above, Chapter 6: what it shows is the weaving of the essential biblical matter into a short thematic exposition. I suggested that the poet starts from the beatitude (Matthew 5. 8), moves on to the topic of blindness, blends in the lessons of John 9. 1-12 (compare Ælfric's homily on St Bartholomew)¹¹ and returns for the resolution of the problem to the beatitude. This account of the poet's procedure explains the concentration on

physical symptoms that those who view the passage as about spiritual blindness conspicuously fail to account for.¹² It shows a freedom with, and depth of knowledge of, the biblical text. There are other passages which might be thought to show a similar kind of approach.

Above, I argued that the early lines of Maxims I, 4b-13, immediately following the dialogue-type exordium, probably depend on James 1. 17-18. But blending in is the 'initium sapientiae timor Domini' commonplace found in Job 28. 28, Proverbs 1. 7 and 9. 10 and in Psalm 110. 10, in 'God sceal mon ærest hergan' (first of all, God should be praised). More particularly, the reference here is to the Psalm, as verse 4,

Memoriam fecit mirabilium suorum, misericors et miserator

Dominus,

explains the otherwise difficult concept of line 6b 'he usic wile para leana gemonian' (he wishes to remind us of those gifts), and links subsequently with 11b-12a, 'he is gen swa he wæs / þeoden geþyldig' (he is even now as he was before, the patient Lord). And in line 7, 'Meotud sceal in wuldre, mon sceal on eorþan [...]' (The Lord dwells in glory, man is on earth), there is an echo of Ecclesiastes 5. 1, 'Deus enim in caelo, et tu super terram [...]'. The passage is made up of a tissue of biblical quotations used with freedom and in the same kind of loose association that the other thematic material appears in.

Further biblical quotations in the first part of Maxims I are discerned

by Biggs and McEntire in 45a, 'lef mon læces behofað' (the sick person needs a doctor), from Matthew 9. 12, and Hill,¹³ 35a 'snotre men sawlum beorgað' (wise people protect their souls), from Proverbs 11. 30. Line 66,

Sceomiande man sceal in sceade hweofan, scir in leohte geriseð

(The person who is ashamed goes about in shadow, to go in the light befits the pure),

draws on the light-darkness imagery of the Bible, perhaps particularly John 3. 20-21,

Omnis enim qui male agit, odit lucem, et non venit ad lucem,
ut non arguantur opera ejus.

Qui autem facit veritatem, venit ad lucem.

The second part of Maxims I has less biblical material. Hill has an Isidorean parallel for lines 120-23 (pp. 445-46). But two of the more popular passages draw on parallel phrases from biblical sources. Towards the end, there is reference to Woden:

Woden worhte weos, wuldor alwalda,
rume roderas. (132-33a)

(Woden made idols, the Almighty one made the heavens, the spacious skies.)

It seems to me that this relies on the Old Testament commonplace.

omnes dii gentium daemonia; Dominus autem caelos fecit,
found in Psalm 95. 5, and in the form.

omnes enim dii populorum idola; Dominus autem caelos fecit,

in I Chronicles 16. 26.¹⁴

The other main section in Maxims I part II which might rely on biblical material, is the very beginning. There has been much commentary on the passage, and it is with some hesitation that I note the curious resemblance to a passage from Ecclesiasticus.

Forst sceal freosan, fyr wudu meltan,
 eorþe growan, is brycgian,
 wæter helm wegan, wundrum lucan
 eorþan cipas. An sceal inbindan
 forstes fetre felameahtig god;
 winter sceal geweorpan, weder eft cuman,
 sumor swegle hat, sund unstill. (71-77)

(Frost freezes, fire consumes wood, earth grows, ice bridges,
 water wears a covering and cunningly locks up the earth's
 shoots. Almighty God alone has the power to unlock the
 fetters of frost: winter is expelled, the breeze returns, summer
 hot with sun, turbulent water.)

Ecclesiasticus 43 is a hymn of praise to God the Creator, singling out sun, moon, stars and other wonders for comment. Among those wonders is the ice:

Gelu sicut salem effundet super terram; et dum gelaverit, fiet
 tanquam cacumina tribuli.

Frigidus ventus aquio flavit, et gelavit crystallus ab aqua, super

omnem congregationem aquarum requiescet, et sicut lorica
induet se aquis;

Et devorabit montes, et exuret desertum, et exstinguet viride,
sicut igne.

Medicina omnium in festinatione nebulae; et ros obvians ab
ardore venienti humilem efficiet eum.

In sermone ejus siluit ventus, et cogitatione sua placavit
abyssum. (21-25)

A similar shorter passage in Psalm 147 praises God,

Qui dat nivem sicut lanam, nebulam sicut cinerem spargit.

Mittit crystallum suam sicut bucellas. Ante faciem frigoris ejus
quis sustinebit?

Emittet verbum suum, et liquefaciet ea. Flabit spiritus ejus; et
fluent aquae. (16-18)

There is a demonstrable similarity in the train of thought between these passages: both biblical parallels associate frost and fire, which is otherwise a problem except as a simple contrast; both see the coming of warmth and the flowing of the water as God's action. Ecclesiasticus has parallels to the helm of the water in 'sicut lorica' (a suitably martial image), and the expulsion (geweorpan) of the winter in 'humiliem efficiet eum'. The punning on onlucan (to unlock), inbindan (to loose) and feter (fetter) is a more native jeu d'esprit, and similar notions can be found elsewhere in Old English poetry, as in the melting of the sword in Grendel's mother's blood (Bwf 1608-11).¹⁵

The parallels are not complete, but in this section of the poem, one might

discern a naturalising of biblical material.

In the final section, borrowings have been proposed for lines 155b-56 (Job 1. 21, see Chapter 3), lines 167-68 ultimately from Terence, and obviously the section on Cain and Abel, lines 192-200, derives ultimately from the Bible.¹⁶ Other borrowings might be posited. Lines 172-80 might have been suggested by Ecclesiastes 4. 9-12:

Earm biþ se þe sceal ana lifgan,
 wineleas wunian hafap him wyrd geteod;
 betre him wære þæt he broþor ahte, begen hi anes monnes,
 eorles eaforan wæran, gif hi sceoldon eofor onginnan
 opþe begen beran; biþ þæt sliphende deor.
 A scyle þa rincas gerædan lædan
 ond him ætsomne swefan;
 næfre hy mon tomælde,
 ær hy deað todæle.

(The man who has to live alone is wretched. It turns out that he has to live friendless. It would be better for him to have a brother, both of them being the sons of one noble man, if they should have to take on a boar or overcome a bear—the latter is a powerfully gripping beast. The warriors should always have their equipment with them and sleep together: their friendship should never be separated by slander before death parts them.)

Ecclesiastes 4. 9-12:

Melius est ergo duos esse simul quam unum: habent enim emolumentum societatis suae.

Si unus ceciderit, ab altero fulcietur. Vae soli, quia cum ceciderit, non habet sublevantem se.

Et si dormierint duo, fovebuntur mutuo; unus quomodo calefiet?

Et si quispiam prævaluerit contra unum, duo resistunt ei.

If, as I think, the whole passage depends on the expansion and elaboration of Ecclesiastes 4. 9-12, the poet's predilection for punning and word-play has introduced the boar and bear against the more prosaic details of the biblical passage. The echo of the marriage service (as in WfL 22) emphasises the closeness between the two, and as also in The Wife's Lament, the susceptibility of intimacy to be disrupted by slander.

In Maxims II, T. D. Hill has observed the parallel of lines 50-57 with Ecclesiasticus 33. 15 (p. 446), but the more consistent catalogue patterns here mean that the compilation derives its principal inspiration from observation and native poetic resources. An element of borrowing is thus demonstrable for all the Maxims poems, and the sources that can reasonably be adduced are principally other wisdom collections from the Bible. One of the more interesting facets of the treatment of this material in the poems is the freedom of the poets to expand and naturalise, and play on the concepts or sounds; to introduce contrast or comparison, pun or parallel. These passages are not

direct translations and they do not appear to me to be the work of poets collecting from books; the focus is rather on the ideas.

A DIFFERENT KIND OF LITERATURE?

Taylor has observed that:

The Maxims [...] constitute a text on the art of poetry. First the Maxims include poetry among the requisite properties of the heroic life: god scop [gersiseþ] gumum — ‘a good poet ennobles men’ (Exeter 127). Secondly, the Maxims are themselves an inventory of poetic themes. They catalogue appropriate formulas and themes with which the poet is to describe courtly life in the hall and the warrior’s life on the battlefield. Finally, they provide a ubiquitous standard by which the audience of a poem may judge heroic stature and deeds (p. 390).

What I think is remarkable, ably though Taylor has illustrated his view, is just how far from the overall gist of the poems this is. There are lines on swords, shields, spears and heroic trappings, but such things were everyday implements, and the focus is often on their construction rather than their use. The shield is hidebound limewood, with a metal boss (Mx1 94b-95a, Mx2 37b-38a), the sword is a prized possession (Mx2 25b-26a), sharp and decorated with gold (Mx1 125-26a), the spear decorated with gold (Mx2 21b-22a) or carried by robbers (Mx1 129b). The way these things are written about is more like Ælfred’s concern with the danger of hurting people with

spears carried carelessly (Ælfred 36, Liebermann I. p. 68). or Æpelstan's that a shield should be made properly (II Æpelstan 15, Liebermann I. p. 158). There are lines on gift-giving and protocol, but these are pictured from the outside or from an unusual perspective. Kings rule and give gifts and fight (Mx1 58b-59, 69, 89-92, Mx2 1a, 14-14, 28b-29a), but the real interest, beyond the conventional, is the queen and the negotiating of marriage, or the ethics of gift-giving and land-taking and the culture of greed that seems to underlie the conventions.

The preoccupations of the poets are not particularly heroic. They are broadly social and ordinary. The view of women is particularly interesting. In The Wife's Lament and Wulf and Eadwacer we seem to have stories told by women who are victims of circumstance. In the Beowulf version of the fight at Finnsburh, the perspective of Hildeburh is exploited, similarly as the perspective of one who is powerless, and the parallels with Wealhpeow are clear. But in the Maxims, women act according to their own station, making their own decisions; and while there are several passages which indulge in moralising about womens' conduct, that is quite conventional, and relatively mild for the wisdom literature as a whole. McGillivray even conjectures that Maxims I part II was composed by a woman.

The Charms reflect a certain view of illness, but in the Maxims we have another (Mx1 29b-34, 111-14a). The perils of hunger, friendlessness, and sailing feature in these poems as they do not elsewhere, though The

Wanderer, The Seafarer and Resignation touch on these things. The role of wisdom and the wise (compare II Edmund 7, 'witan scylon fæhðe sectan'. the authorities must arbitrate in feuds, Liebermann I, p. 188, with Mx1 18b-23a), the menace of thieves, shysters and immoral people, the characteristics of the seasons and the weather, games and pastimes, are all given attention. The poets show an acute interest in the animal kingdom, and alongside that, wonder about death and the destiny of the soul, and how best to bring up children. In terms of perspective, then, the Maxims are different from the heroic and aristocratic poetry of Beowulf, and also from the monastic and learned world of the biblical, liturgical and hagiographical poems, a point also made by Earl in his article.

There are some hints of shaping in the poems. All four are around 70 lines long, and this might hint at the three sections of Maxims I being part of a single poem. Hansen, Solomon Complex, p. 172, notes the reversion in part I of the poem to the concept of reward, lean (6 and 70) and God's ordaining, (ge)teode (5 and 70) and the recurrence of the first-person pronoun, similarly, might indicate that this was an envelope pattern.¹⁷ Part II ends emphatically with the repeated use of the parenthetic exclamation, 'þæt is rice god' (that is the powerful God, 134b), 'þæt is meotud sylfa' (that is the Lord himself, 137b), and this is used elsewhere as a transitional or terminating device. In part III it is difficult to see any structuring device, though the last line has the feel of 'devil take the hindmost'. What Greenfield and Evert term the 'movement from consideration of the visibilia of the earthly experience to

the invisibilia of the heavenly' (p. 340), or the link with The Menologium before and the Chronicle afterwards, may well give Maxims II its structure, though the repetition of 'meotod ana wat [...] drihten ana wat' may also indicate closure. These things, such as they are, might indicate that there was an attempt on the part of poet or scribe to demarcate units of discourse internally. There are of course the chirographical markings of fitt divisions, space and capitals in the Exeter Book, and rubrication and capitals in the Cotton manuscript.

Apart from The Riming Poem, the Maxims have more wordplay and exploitation of sound as a structuring device than other poems in Old English. The Riddles play on concepts rather than sounds for the most part. The striking lines on the good horse,

Til mon tiles ond tomes meares,
cūpes ond gecostes ond calcrondes

(Mx1 141-42)

(A good person remembers a good, tame horse, familiar and
reliable and well-shod),

are remarkable for a kind of strong-genitive-singular end-rhyme (homoeoteleuton), which in some sense links them with the preceding lines which have a different kind of end-rhyme resulting from concatenated infinitives. While the earlier lines 138-40 could be multiplied indefinitely (and it is interesting that this 'easy' rhyming is eschewed in The Riming Poem), the lines on the horse have a self-contained aspect, and might be proverbial. The

catalogue of superlatives in Maxims II also have rhyme. There are one-line puns, the first two with rhyme or half-rhyme, ‘god bið genge ond wip god lenge’ (good prevails and lasts before God, 120), ‘treo sceolon brædan ond treow weaxan’ (trees spread, and good faith grows, 159); ‘wif sceal wip wer wære gehealdan’ (a woman ought to keep faith with her man, 100a): ‘[...] gebidan þæs he gebædan ne mæg’ (‘wait for what cannot be compelled’, 104a, suggested by Nelson to be proverbial, “Is” and “Ought”, p. 114), as well as the play on eofor / eafora, and begen / begen in lines 174-76 mentioned above. There is also front rhyme (polyptoton): ‘frod with frodne’ (the wise with the wise, 19a), ‘til sceal mid tilum’ (a good person is found among good people, 23a), and similarly in Maxims II 52a and 53a.

The unusually high incidence of single half-lines in the Maxims poems has been noted by A. J. Bliss,¹⁸ who suggests comparison with the Norse metres, ljóðahátt and galdralag, and recommends further editing to acknowledge the existence of several more such half-lines. And a glance at the edited texts reveals intermittent occurrence of hypermetric lines. Outside of the sceal on catalogue of Maxims II, a feature that is notable is the lack of variation. C. L. Wrenn posited the existence of a popular verse form distinct from the aristocratic form of heroic poems, and suggested that the story of Cædmon is about the conversion of the aristocratic form of heroic verse to the purposes of Christianity.¹⁹ Comparing Cædmon's Hymn with the Maxims, one is struck by the fact that variation barely surfaces in the latter. In Maxims I part I, 4b-17, the various synonyms for God appear eight times

(god, æelmihtig (god), and meotud twice each, fæder, and þeoden once each, excluding pronouns), but only two of those are in variation; this moreover is a high proportion compared with the rest of Maxims I.

The overwhelming impression of the poems is of free compilation and expansion of materials from various sources, with an emphasis on sound beyond mere alliteration as a feature of style, and with slightly different patterns of metre from most Old English verse. Taking this evidence with that of the preoccupations of the poets with matters of everyday life and how it should be faced in all its variety, there are grounds for suggesting that the Maxims are different from classical Old English verse. That the poems are popular verse, not the verse of scop or scholar, would seem to be a reasonable supposition from the themes. But I would like to suggest that they might well be the products of what Walter J. Ong calls 'orally based thought and expression'.²⁰

ORAL LITERATURE

The debate on orality in relation to Old English verse has almost exclusively been conducted in the area of oral formulaic studies; but for the metrical reasons above, because of the peculiar subject-matter of the poems, because of the emphasis on patterns of sound and loose association of ideas, the Maxims have not been noticeably congenial to the oral formulaic theorists. In his chapter 'Some psychodynamics of orality', Ong lists nine features of oral thought and expression, prefaced by the following remarks:

An interlocutor is virtually essential: it is hard to talk to yourself for hours on end. Sustained thought in an oral culture is tied to communication.

But even with a listener to stimulate and ground your thought, the bits and pieces of your thought cannot be preserved in jotted notes. How could you ever call back to mind what you had so laboriously worked out? The only answer is: Think memorable thoughts. In a primary oral culture, to solve effectively the problem of retaining and retrieving carefully articulated thought, you have to do your thinking in mnemonic patterns, shaped for ready oral recurrence. Your thought must come into being in heavily rhythmic, balanced patterns, in repetitions or antitheses, in alliterations and assonances, in epithetic and other formulary expressions, in standard thematic settings (the assembly, the meal, the duel, the hero's 'helper', and so on), in proverbs which are constantly heard by everyone, so that they come to mind readily and which themselves are patterned for retention and ready recall, or in other mnemonic form. Serious thought is intertwined with memory systems. Mnemonic needs determine even syntax [...].

Formulas help implement rhythmic discourse and also act as mnemonic aids in their own right, as set expressions circulating through the mouths and ears of all. [...] Fixed,

often rhythmically balanced, expressions of this sort and of other sorts can be found occasionally in print, indeed can be 'looked up' in books of sayings, but in oral cultures they are not occasional. They are incessant. They form the substance of thought itself. Thought in any extended form is impossible without them, for it consists in them. (pp. 34-35)

This passage in more or less its entirety maps directly onto the Maxims. The demand for an interlocutor strikes me as a better explanation of the embryonic dialogue-type opening of Maxims I part I than any theory of debate or riddle- or wisdom-contest: Hansen suggests it 'displays and celebrates an interactive process, a communicative system' (Solomon Complex, p. 158). The thematic developments of the poems illustrate the aural features and the repetition and antithesis and inclusion of proverbs that Ong describes. The verse form is adapted to the thought, rather than the thought adapted to the verse form.

The first five of the nine features that Ong sees as characteristic of 'orally based thought and expression' all fit the Maxims more or less closely.

i. Additive rather than subordinative. The Maxims must be the least subordinative poems in Old English. Each of the parts of Maxims I has perhaps a dozen subordinating conjunctions. The language used itself denies the validity of the modern search for connected structure: items are added, not connected.

ii. Aggregative rather than analytic. 'Oral folk', writes Ong, 'prefer [...] not the soldier, but the brave soldier; not the princess, but the beautiful

princess; not the oak, but the sturdy oak' (p. 38). The sceal on catalogue of Maxims II provides a useful source of poetic collocations and even kennings of this type, though leax (salmon), for example, only occurs elsewhere in The Meters of Boethius 19. 12. In Maxims I, we might notice æلميhtig (almighty) or felاميhtig (almighty) with God (8b-10b, 17, 75), the torht (bright) heavenly bodies (41), the linden shield (93-94), the græga (grey) wolf (148, 150).

iii. Redundant or 'copious'. Some of the thematic units of Maxims I are built on repetition. The blind man passage for example, starts with purity of heart in 39a and reverts to it in an envelope pattern in 44b. The blindness expressed in 39b is repeated in 40a, 40b-41a; the suffering introduced in polian in 39b, is repeated in 41b, 42a, 42b. In the sceal on catalogue of Maxims II the a-verse adjectival phrases are 'copious', slowing down the movement of the verse, and expanding what has already been said.

iv. Conservative or traditionalist. The moral values and view of social functions within the Maxims are basically Christian and conservative. The aristocratic marriage is at least partly a financial transaction such as the Anglo-Saxon laws go into detail about (Mx1 81-82a, and whatever the exact meaning of the lines, Mx2 43b-45a). The passages that Taylor deals with as examples of 'heroic ritual' very largely illustrate this conservative aspect.

v. Close to the human lifeworld. 'In the absence of elaborate analytic categories [...], oral cultures must conceptualize and verbalize all their knowledge with more or less close reference to the human lifeworld, assimilating the alien, objective world to the more immediate, familiar interaction of human beings' (p. 42). The Maxims contain a great deal of

information, and they consistently integrate this information within the human or divine sphere: what humans cannot explain, God knows about, and God is Father and Lord (and see further below). What humans can observe is useful, and shows patterns in the world and the spiritual realm which affect human life. There is an interest in the 'other', the blind person, the Frisian, the dragon and the monster, but there is a remedy for blindness, there are lessons to be learned from the faithfulness of the Frisian's wife, and dragons and monsters can be located predictably in burial mounds and fens. The Rune Poem also demonstrates this insistence on reference to the human lifeworld in its lore.

The other features mentioned by Ong tend to refer to narrative or other situations. There is the debate or flyting situation which uses proverbs (see Chapter 5) and is 'agonistically toned'. There are characters who engage the audience's sympathy (the audience is 'empathetic and participatory', and here we might note that the only named characters in the poems are God, Christ, Woden, Cain and Abel). Oral societies are 'homeostatic and live very much in a present which keeps itself in equilibrium or homeostasis by sloughing off memories which no longer have present relevance' (p. 46): compare Chapter 6 and the fact that nothing in the Maxims can reliably point to active pagan practice. And finally, the thinking is 'situational rather than abstract': two of the debated lines in Maxims II, lines 10a and 13a at least partly hinge on the degree of abstraction we can posit for the poet's thought. Krapp and Dobbie's emendations suggest that they plump for a less abstract mode of thinking, so

that truth is not most deceptive but clearest, and wax, not misery, is amazingly sticky. But without more of a situation for the poet to be situational in, we cannot be sure of his meaning here. Overall, however, there is a striking resemblance between the kind of thinking we find in the Maxims and that described by Ong as characteristic of ‘orally based thought and expression’.

PURPOSE

It is possible to accept the Maxims as wisdom literature, as borrowing and integrating material from various sources, as oral literature of a unusual sort, as poetry of occasionally beautiful and interesting aspect—but still to remain puzzled by the question of purpose, or perhaps more precisely, rationale. This matter brings us back to the views expressed by Shippey and Hansen at the beginning of the chapter. What should be noted before going further, however, is the fact that the purpose and rationale of the other wisdom collections is not in any real doubt. The book of Proverbs begins in a manner very similar to Maxims I with the interaction of the wise, but there it is made clear that the book is for instruction, ‘ad sciendam sapientiam et disciplinam; ad intelligenda verba prudentiae’ etc.. Proverbs 1. 2-3; similarly the Cato, ‘praecepta mea ita legito, ut intellegas’ (read my precepts in order to understand). Of the Greek and Roman gnostic anthologies, John Barns concludes that there were two basic impulses behind the collections, the pleasure of the reader, and the instruction of the reader (p. 132-34).²¹ This complex of ideas—understanding, wisdom, learning, teaching, preserving and

maintaining tradition—underlies the whole enterprise of gnomology.

Both Shippey's and Hansen's difficulties with the poems reduce to one of social psychology. Shippey cannot find a function and a context where the poems might achieve that function, Hansen is not sure that her complex and sensitive methodology of reading the poems actually fits the poems' purpose. If the poems are educational in purpose, why are they not like other Old English didactic poems with more consistent mnemonic, catalogue or narrative form? Plainly, to answer this question it is pointless to look ever more closely at other Old English poems; the answer might rather be found in a more general theory of knowledge and its role in a society. I propose, therefore, to turn to 'sociology of knowledge', by way of an example, for a theoretical approach to the purpose of the poems.

'FROST FREEZES'

It is of course a 'brute fact' that frost freezes.²² But such a brute fact functions differently in different societies. Francis Bacon, one of the great pioneers of science in the Enlightenment, was interested in the effect of frost from a scientific and empirical angle, so interested, in fact, that he died from its effects:

At the end of March 1626, being near Highgate on a snowy day, he left his coach to collect snow with which he meant to stuff a fowl in order to observe the effect of cold on the preservation of its flesh. In so doing he caught a chill, and

took refuge in Lord Arundel's house, where, on 9 April, he died of the disease which is now known as bronchitis. He was buried at St Michael's Church, St Albans.²³

Some centuries earlier, the English sailor Wulfstan told King Ælfred of his encounter with the Este, a tribe with peculiar customs relating to their dead, whom they could preserve for up to half a year while their wealth was consumed by drinking and gambling among those surviving the dead man.²⁴

Wulfstan notes:

7 þær is mid Estum an mægð þæt hi magon cyle gewyrcean, 7
þy þær licgað þa deadan men swa lange 7 ne fuliað, þæt hy
wyrcað þone cyle hine on, 7 þeah man asette twegen fætels full
ealað oððe wæteres, hy gedoð þæt oþer bið oferfrozen, sam hit
sy sumor, sam winter. (pp. 17-18)

(There is among the Este a tribe who can refrigerate, and for this reason the dead men can lie there so long without corruption, because they refrigerate them. And if two vessels full of beer or water are put out, they can make it so that one of them is frozen over, summer or winter).

For all his hard-headed sailor's attention to detail, it looks as if Wulfstan has been taken in by the party-trick of the Este. He can simply observe that water freezes and beer does not (to give oþer its apparent meaning here), and he attributes the ability to freeze not to some ice pit, but to an almost magical ability to 'make' cold among a tribe of the people.

There are three world views in contrast here. There is Bacon's scientific world view which sees experiment and induction as the way to accurate knowledge and explanation of phenomena; there is, implied by Wulfstan's account, a world view among the Este which is familiar with the properties of ice, and is able to put that knowledge to good use; and there is in Wulfstan a world view which sees the ability to manipulate cold as not so much using natural properties of ice as arcane knowledge restricted to a certain group within the people. Bacon's world view is theoretically sophisticated: everybody, even in the seventeenth century, knew that cold preserves things, but Bacon wanted to measure and observe. Bacon's maxims, expressed in the Novum Organum, were that,

Duæ viæ sunt, atque esse possunt, ad inquirendam et inveniendam veritatem. Altera a sensu et particularibus advolat ad axiomata maxime generalia [...]. Altera a sensu et particularibus excitat axiomata, ascendo continenter et gradatim, ut ultimo loco perveniatur ad maxime generalia; quæ via vera est, sed intentata.

(Aphorismi de Interpretatione Naturæ et Regno Hominis, XIX)²⁵

(There are and can be only two ways of searching into and discovering truth. The one flies from the senses and particulars to the most general axioms [...]. The other derives axioms from the senses and particulars, rising by a gradual and unbroken ascent, so that it arrives at the most general axioms last of all. This is the true way, but as yet untried.

Translation from Works, IV, p. 50.)

The sheer novelty of Bacon's approach is hinted at in the final sentence in the quotation; it marks the dividing line between a scientific world view and a naturalistic one. Wulfstan was unequipped to make scientific, empirical sense of the freezing of water but not beer. Some kind of ratiocination by which his knowledge that such things are the province of God's omnipotence ('An sceal inbindan forstes fetre', God alone has the power to unlock the fetter of frost) interacts with his knowledge that the further people live from Christianity, the more likely they are to be involved in magic, and produces an anthropological explanation of the phenomenon in his mind. The Este were no more scientific in their world view than Wulfstan, we must presume, even though they knew the fact that Bacon was experimenting with, namely that cold retards corruption in dead flesh. Perhaps the ice pits had been used over generations specifically for the funereal purposes that Wulfstan records and the technology had grown out of a pragmatic need tied with favourable natural conditions. For them, freezing things was part of everyday reality, customary knowledge, an institution that had grown out of repeated action in their tribal history. So frost freezes, but it freezes differently for different societies.

AN APPROACH FROM THE SOCIOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE

Some explanation of this basic fact is worth searching for. There is almost no point in dismissing the view of Wulfstan and the Este as pre-scientific or primitive or irrational, because for the latter the technology of freezing is sophisticated, just as Wulfstan's anthropology and sailing are, in

their way, sophisticated. Their interpretation of phenomena springs logically from the world view, axioms, indeed (I suggest) the maxims of their societies. Their knowledge of things is, in other words, socially conditioned. While much in the sociology of knowledge, as Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann note in The Social Construction of Reality, has been concerned with 'epistemological questions on the theoretical level' and with 'questions of intellectual history on the empirical level' (p. 25), their work has consciously set itself the task of giving a 'general and systematic account of the role of knowledge in society' (p. 207), with particular emphasis on the reality of everyday life.

The basic contention of Berger and Luckmann's work is that the reality of everyday life is a production of human activity which in its turn produces and directs human activity. Reality is the backdrop of what everybody knows and nobody needs to question; it is the perception of habits, order, relationships and structure that is unproblematic and needs no verification. But this reality is humanly produced by procedures which Berger and Luckmann outline.

Human activity is characterised by habit: the more habitual the action, the less it needs to be thought about and the less problematical it is. Human consciousness is intentional (p. 34) and it perceives patterns in everyday life which seem independent of the perceiver (p. 35). As a result of this, perception of human activity is subject to typification: we see people and their

actions as typical—of insurance salesmen, academics and so on. These typifications are adjustable in particular instances, but even a double-glazing salesperson who lets you say something does not fundamentally change the ‘reality’ that most (whom you have never met) do not. Typification also applies to kinds of interaction: one typically encounters a double-glazing salesperson in a telephone conversation on a Friday evening, when the salesperson is ‘not trying to sell anything’, and when one is not wishing to be rude but will put the phone down if they will not take ‘no’ for an answer. Berger and Luckmann maintain that,

Social structure is the sum total of these typifications and of the recurrent patterns of interaction established by means of them.

As such, social structure is an essential element of the reality of everyday life. (p. 48)

Communication is fundamental to the construction of social reality. Subjective meanings can be conveyed in different ways: gestures, facial expressions and so on. These objectivate subjective meanings and make them available to others. The normal mode of objectivation is by means of language which, because it is shared, participates in the social reality of its speakers:

Language originates in and has primary reference to everyday life. [...] Language provides me with a ready-made possibility for the ongoing objectification of my unfolding experience. [...] Language also typifies experiences, allowing me to

subsume them under broad categories in terms of which they have meaning not only to myself but also to my fellowmen.

As it typifies, it also anonymizes experiences, for the typified experience can, in principle, be duplicated by anyone falling into the category in question. (p. 53)

Language accumulates socially defined meanings, and is the principal means by which individuals share in 'the common stock of knowledge'. Furthermore,

Since everyday life is dominated by the pragmatic motive, recipe knowledge, that is, knowledge limited to pragmatic competence in routine performances, occupies a prominent place in the social stock of knowledge. [...] Typically, I have little interest in going beyond this pragmatically necessary knowledge so long as [...] problems can [...] be mastered thereby. (pp. 56-57)

Different people have different 'recipe knowledge', and consequently, an important element of my knowledge of everyday life is the knowledge of the relevance structures of others. [...] Knowledge of how the socially available stock of knowledge is distributed, at least in outline, is an important element of that same stock of knowledge. (pp. 60-61)

Habitual actions precede institutionalization: 'labour, sexuality and territoriality are [...] likely foci of typification and habitualization' (p. 75),

which in society at large become institutionalised:

Institutionalization occurs whenever there is reciprocal typification of habitualized actions by types of actors. [...] Institutions [...] by the very fact of their existence, control human conduct by setting up predefined patterns of conduct, which channel it in one direction as against the many other directions that would theoretically be possible.

(p. 72)

‘An institutional world [...] is experienced as an objective reality’ (p. 77), and allows a person to predict the actions of others. ‘Roles represent the institutional order’ and share the controlling character of the institution (p. 92). ‘Historically, roles that symbolically represent the total institutional order have been most commonly located in political and religious institutions’ (p. 94). Playing a role is participating in the social and institutional world, internalising a role makes the social and institutional world real (p. 91). While institutionalisation effectively implies the accumulation of role-specific knowledge,

The primary knowledge about the institutional order is knowledge on the pre-theoretical level. It is the sum total of ‘what everybody knows’ about a social world, an assemblage of maxims, morals, proverbial nuggets of wisdom, values and beliefs, myths, and so forth, the theoretical integration of which requires considerable intellectual fortitude in itself [...]. On the pre-theoretical level, however, every institution has a

body of transmitted recipe knowledge, that is, knowledge that supplies the institutionally appropriate rules of conduct. [...]

What is taken for granted as knowledge in the society comes to be coextensive with the knowable, or at any rate provides the framework within which anything not yet known will come to be known in the future. (p. 83)

When institutions or roles become objectified, they are said to be reified:

Reification is the apprehension of human phenomena as if they were things, that is, in non-human or possibly supra-human terms. [...] Reification is the apprehension of the products of human activity as if they were something other than human products — such as facts of nature, results of cosmic laws, or manifestations of divine will. [...] Reification can be described as an extreme step in the process of objectivation, whereby the objectivated world loses its comprehensibility as a human enterprise and becomes fixated as a non-human, non-humanizable, inert facticity. (p. 106)

Institutions are perceived as objective and are transmitted as tradition, in an educational process which often takes the form of memorising a collection of ‘institutional formulae’ (p. 87). Legitimation is the process by which the institution is explained and justified to a generation for which the

institution has become distinct from personal experience and habit:

Legitimation 'explains' the institutional order by ascribing cognitive validity to its objectivated meanings.

Legitimation justifies the institutional order by giving a normative dignity to its practical imperatives. [...]

Legitimation not only tells the individual why he should perform one action and not another; it also tells him why things are what they are. In other words, 'knowledge' precedes 'values' in the legitimation of institutions.

(p. 111)

There are four levels of legitimation: firstly, the level of vocabulary, which identifies and describes entities and processes; secondly, 'theoretical propositions in a rudimentary form', namely 'proverbs, moral maxims and wise sayings [...] legends and folk tales' (p. 112); thirdly, 'comprehensive frames of reference for [...] sectors of institutionalized conduct' (p. 112); and finally, the level of 'symbolic universes'. 'Symbolic universes' transcend and include the institutional order, they provide an explanation for, and integrate all the discrete elements of personal experience, institutions, history, marginal and terrifying situations (aloneness and death), 'by locating them in a comprehensively meaningful world' (p. 121). The symbolic universe provides order by putting 'everything in its right place' (p. 116). 'The political order is legitimated by reference to a cosmic order of power and justice' (p. 121), and the symbolic universe will even provide the individual with a recipe for 'correct death' (p. 119).

When the symbolic universe is threatened by an alternative account of reality, there are machineries of universe-maintenance, namely therapy and nihilation. Therapy diagnoses the problem and recommends a curative process (say, exorcism). Nihilation is negative legitimation which assigns 'an inferior ontological status, and thereby a not-to-be-taken-seriously cognitive status, to all definitions existing outside the symbolic universe' (p. 132).

The process by which individuals become part of their society, and by which they participate in the construction of reality is socialization. Primary socialisation is the process of learning one's identity through the mediation of significant others: 'the self is a reflected entity, reflecting the attitudes first taken by significant others towards it' (p. 152). The child internalises the world of those significant others as the world, and by progressive abstraction from their roles and attitudes, proceeds to internalisation of a generalised order of attitudes and roles (pp. 152-53). Secondary socialisation is the internalisation of particular roles, usually mediated by teachers or peer groups, whose role identity is maintained 'by a range of legitimations ranging from simple maxims [...] to elaborate mythological constructions' (p. 159). In a highly socialised society,

everyone pretty much is what he is supposed to be. In such a society identities are easily recognizable, objectively and subjectively. Everybody knows who everybody else is and who he is himself.

(p. 184)

THE MAXIMS

Despite the often rebarbative language in which these ideas are expressed, they provide a compelling analysis of 'the social construction of reality'. But more importantly for present purposes, Berger and Luckmann's account of the processes by which reality is constructed very closely resembles the kind of processes that can be seen to be going on in the Maxims, and thus may provide a context for understanding the purpose of the poems.

It is immediately evident, for example, that the Maxims are dealing predominantly with habitual and typified activity in the world, and indeed in the symbolic universe of Christianity. There is almost no reference to individuality, and even the vignettes of the ides of the Cotton Maxims, the Frisian woman and the queen of the Exeter collection, are there as typifications, which 'can, in principle, be duplicated by anyone falling into the category in question' (p. 53). The social situations are also typified. The purpose of human communication is to exchange knowledge and confirm through language the typifications and roles that have already been adopted. Hence the wise meet together (Mx1 19b-20), exchange words (Mx1 1-4a, 138), and resolve difficulties (Mx1 20). Marriage is a transaction involving money, beagas (Mx1 81-82b, 130a, Mx2 45a). The role of the king is to distribute gifts (Mx1 83a, Mx2 28a-29b), as well as to rule (Mx2 1a). The eorl is courageous and faithful (Mx2 16a, 32b), rides on a horse (Mx1 62a), and grows in martial prowess (Mx1 83b-84a). Moreover, experience of the non-human world is typified: frost freezes (Mx1 71a), winter is coldest

(though spring drags out the cold, Mx2 5b-6), bears are dangerous (Mx1 176b, Mx2 29b-30a). The point hardly needs to be laboured that the Maxims objectivate Anglo-Saxon society's typifications of the human and natural world.

Some of the typifications in themselves constitute 'recipe knowledge'. The king's role as gift-giver and ruler implies pragmatic competence in routine performance of these duties, as does the eorl's role as fighter and rider. But we saw earlier that maxims frequently express 'trade rules', and thus beyond the limits of the Maxims poems, the form comprehends recipe knowledge. The lines on the horse (Mx1 141-42) might be a horse-dealer's recipe knowledge (the AA gives rather similar lists of things to remember in buying a second-hand car). Maxims I 111-13 likewise are recipe knowledge for dealing with famine and illness—give the victim sun and food: compare the Vita Cuthberti Anonymi I, iiiii, and the Vita Baedae II, where Cuðbert is laid in the sun when suffering from a disease in the knee; and contrast the esoteric healing procedures and knowledge found in the Charms. This recipe knowledge is part of the common stock, not the province of the shaman. And if, as I suggest, Wulfstan the sailor shared the kind of world view found in the Maxims, he shows 'little interest in going beyond this pragmatically necessary knowledge' (p. 57) when it comes to refrigeration: rather than allow his experience to challenge the axioms he knows, he sees the technology as a socially role-restricted province of knowledge, relevant to the Este, and distributed only to a section of that society.

The process of institutionalisation has been fully developed in the society that produced the Maxims. The king very evidently represents the political order in Maxims II, taking pre-eminence in the first line. What is perhaps more interesting is that though the symbolic universe of the poems is Christian, there is no obvious human role representing the religious institution; no priest, bishop, monk, no church even. This indicates several things: firstly, it confirms the suggestion that the Maxims are popular poetry—a ‘monkish redactor’ would surely have found some space for his own sphere in a miscellaneous catalogue of the-world-as-we-know-it; secondly, it suggests the Christian world view is fully naturalised and ‘inhabited’, so that God himself is the authority, not any intermediary; thirdly, it points to the fact that the religious world view is reified. God is omniscient, immanent and omnipotent: death, disease and the fate of the soul are among the provinces of divine knowledge not available to humans; God creates, provides, ordains, heals, gives gifts and changes the seasons; the heavens, all humanity, goodness and judgement are among the provinces of his power.

‘Labour, sexuality and territoriality’ (p. 75) are institutionalised in the poems and in maxims more generally. The political order depends on the division of labour, and hence the king, the eorl, the warriors and princes, are an institution in the poems. The hanging of the criminal (Mx2 55b-57a) shows a political order with rights of sanction against human life. The role of the queen in Maxims I part II combines gender and labour roles. The roles of the wise men, the doctor and parents are mentioned, and thieves and bad

characters are institutionally associated with darkness (Mx1 66a, Mx2 42a). Sailing is institutionalised as a Frisian speciality, though others are also involved (Mx1 184-86). The merchant has wealth (Mx1 107-10), the minstrel has songs and comforts arising therefrom (Mx1 127a, 164a, 169-70). The institutions of marriage and gender roles are particularly clear in Maxims I parts I and II: procreation (24-25a), parenthood (45b-50a), domestic duties for women (63a), sanctions against socially inappropriate behaviour (64-65), socially appropriate behaviour for the queen (82b-92), for the Frisian woman, and for every wife (94b-103).

The passage in Maxims II 42b-45a on the ides appears at first sight to be subversive, but it may be a warning:

Ides sceal dyrne cræfte,

fæmne hire freond gesecean, gif heo nelle on folce gepeon

þæt hi man beagum gebicge.

(A lady, a young woman, secretly seeks out her lover if she does not wish to prosper among her people so that she is obtained with rings, ie. married.)

There is no particular reason why sceal should mean ‘must’ here,²⁶ when in the preceding lines it means something like ‘does’—or at any rate, something rather colourless. And with the þeof (thief) and the þyrs (monster) in the lines immediately preceding, the woman may be perceived as choosing to exclude herself from social convention and reaping the reward of a bad reputation and no marriage. ‘On folce gepeon’ is difficult,²⁷ but its associations are

positive, and those of ‘dyrne cræft’ are negative. If this passage is urging subversive action, the institution of the language counters it: the lady is free to break convention if she wishes, but it is implied that it would be a bad choice.

Territoriality is an institution in the Maxims, implied in the first line of Maxims II, and in the territorially envisaged land where God lives at the end of the same poem. In Maxims I, this institution even sets limits to the king’s power:

Cyning biþ anwealdes georn;

lað se þe londes monað, leof se þe mare beodeð.

(58b-59)

(The king is eager for power: the one who claims land is hated,
the one who promises more is loved.)

Settled enjoyment of the land is a blessing (37a), and war is necessary for protection of the settlement (127b-28).

Not only do the poems provide pre-theoretical knowledge about the institutional order of Anglo-Saxon England in precisely the form that Berger and Luckmann suggest, ‘an assemblage of maxims, morals, proverbial nuggets of wisdom, values and beliefs, myths and so forth’, they also provide ‘the framework within which anything not yet known will come to be known in the future’ (p. 83). This is not merely the social framework, but the framework in which the maxims are expressed. The purpose of the structures of

opposition, the location catalogue and the catalogue of superlatives, is precisely to encompass the vast plethora of present experience and knowledge in a framework which allows infinite extension. The constant emphasis on human and natural variety throughout the poems implies that if all this can be comprehended, so also can anything else. Since relatively few Anglo-Saxons would have seen dragons or byrsas, the ability of the catalogue to embrace these shows its comprehensiveness. Anything that can be typified, measured, located, compared or contrasted with other things, and related to human life can be comprehended by the form of the maxim and the gnome. The shock of the new can be diminished by simply applying one of these relativising descriptions, and a sense of cognitive control regained.

Some mention has already been made of reification. Reification provides a sense of closure to the parts of Maxims I. In the first two, there is an appeal to the generous gifts and grace given by God, and the responsibility of human beings to manage and repay him for those gifts. Part III is unusual in that it reifies human violence on the pattern of Cain and Abel, and implies the failure of the wisdom and counsel with which the section starts. It may perhaps be a version of the doctrine of original sin that underlies the passage 192-204, but the poet is at pains to point out the ubiquity, longevity and savagery of subsequent human conflict. In other words, conflict ceases to be a human choice and becomes inevitable: the only choice is bravery or cowardice (203-204). Violence is reified, and the institutional order in which violence is inevitable is legitimated by giving

cognitive value to bravery ('hyge [sceal] heardum men', courage is the province of the brave man, 203a) and nihilating cowardliness by giving it an inferior ontological status ('ond a þæs heanan hyge hord unginnost', and always for the base mind the smallest treasure, 204).

Maxims are ideal for purposes of legitimation. 'Legitimation not only tells the individual why he should perform one action and not another; it also tells him why things are what they are' (p. 111). There is in fact a seamless continuum from knowledge to values in the gnomic verbs sceal and bið, as was argued in Chapter 2. The forms themselves span the first three levels of legitimation mentioned by Berger and Luckmann, by defining terms ('dom biþ selast', fame is best, Mx1 80b), by relating terms to aspects of behaviour ('[sceal mon] dom areccan', fame is to be raised up, worked for, Mx1 140a), and by providing frames of reference for sectors of institutionalised conduct ('ellen sceal on eorle', courage is characteristic of the warrior, Mx2 16a).

But the legitimation par excellence in the Maxims is provided by the symbolic universe of Christianity. Christianity provides a picture of 'a comprehensively meaningful world' (p. 121) for the poems by 'putting everything in its right place'. It is no accident that after the exordium of Maxims I, the first duty of human beings is to worship God. Woden is nihilated by giving him inferior ontological status as creator merely of idols, compared with God the creator of the infinite heavens, the true and powerful God who gives us all we need for life, and rules over all (Mx1 132-37).

Unexpected death is the lot of the fool who fails to acknowledge God (Mx1 35), and God will not acknowledge the faithless, heedless, bitter and unreliable person (Mx1 161-63).

The poems wrestle with the marginal and terrifying situations that have the potential to destroy social reality, particularly death and aloneness. There is a consistent contrast between the singularity of God, which is good, and the aloneness of creatures which is bad. Keeping up friendships, having family and companions prevents the loneliness which leads to vulnerability against wild animals, or makes a man take wolves for friends, or live alone like the þyrs in the wastelands. Participating in the social rituals of conversation, worship, gift-giving and fighting is participating in the meaningful world. Being alone is the denial of meaning because meaning is socially constructed. Human beings as social animals need society and in its absence try to make friends with wolves which have no capacity for human meanings like friendship, compassion or grief. There is little about this that is immediately Christian, beyond Genesis 2. 18, 'Dixit quoque Dominus Deus: Non est bonum esse hominem solum'. That it belongs to the symbolic universe is seen in the integration of the socially threatening things that are apparently meaningless. Three times the Maxims tell us that only God knows—about the destination of the plague (Mx1 29b-30), and about the destination of the soul after death (Mx2 57b-66). Nevertheless knowledge of the death of children and of everybody else is attributed to a benevolent divinity ('nergende fæder') whose purpose in creation gives meaning even to early death (Mx1 31-34b).

This is taken one step further in the passage concerning the blind man. He alone knows the suffering of blindness (Mx1 42a), but such knowledge is partial. God's knowledge of the inner motivations of human beings can reverse both cause and symptoms of suffering. There is a contrast here with the way Bede habitually uses the motif of blindness and healing. The infliction of blindness nihilates an alternative reality in the story of St Alban (HE I. 7) as it did in Acts 13. 10-11; the curing of blindness validates the Roman as against the Celtic institutions of Christianity (HE II. 2). But here where the focus is on knowledge as socially constructed, the emphasis falls on the overarching reality of God's omniscience which gives implicit meaning to human ignorance and suffering. What we do not know or understand is not meaningless, because the symbolic universe gives it a place in the total meaning of the world.

There is much more that could be discussed with regard to the social construction of reality in the Maxims. But the theory and illustration of it drawn from the Old English poems suggest that the purpose of the poems is educational in the sense of presenting what everybody knows. In Berger and Luckmann's scheme, it is the kind of learning that constitutes primary socialisation, while the 'trade rules' type of maxims would constitute secondary socialisation. If this is true, then Shippey is probably right to be unable to imagine the poems sung in the meadhall, read in the refectory, or copied as an exercise. Parts of them might more naturally be used in

conversation, in passing on advice, or built into a poem by a collector of wisdom. But Shippey is quite wrong to conclude that the poems 'tell us about the natural and familiar assumptions of their authors, in a way that can hardly have been intended' (p. 18). Taylor was right in my view, in seeing the poems as a 'time capsule' (p. 407). They outline, and in the process construct, an Anglo-Saxon understanding of reality, quite deliberately focusing on the everyday, the typical, the social, the natural, in order to build up a framework which potentially comprehends all human and natural phenomena and sets the whole construct under the omniscience of God. This view explains why the poems do not immediately amuse (what we already know tends not to amuse), why they do not aim at completeness (impossible), why they are not as didactic as some other poems (they constitute a framework for understanding, not a 'handbook of ritual' or list of behavioural imperatives). This view also tells against the value of the modern search for narrative or a clear thread of coherent structure: each maxim, gnome, or vignette is complete in itself, makes sense in itself, but is part of a much larger entity, the social stock of knowledge. The poets explore sound and sense linkages and encourage the audience to create meanings and to associate ideas, they borrow notions and expressions from various sources, but ultimately it is the social context which makes sense of the poems, and the poems which make sense of the social context.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 7

1. R. McGregor Dawson, 'The Structure of the Old English Gnostic Poems', JEGP, 61 (1962), 14-22 (p. 15).
2. ASPR III, pp. xlvi-xlvii.
3. Wim Tigges, 'Snakes and Ladders: Ambiguity and Coherence in The Exeter Book Riddle and Maxims', in Companion to Old English Poetry, pp. 95-118.
4. Murray McGillivray, 'The Exeter Book Maxims I B: An Anglo-Saxon Woman's View of Marriage', English Studies in Canada, 15 (1989), 383-97.
5. Nigel F. Barley, 'Structure in the Cotton Gnomes', NM, 78 (1977), 244-49.
6. P. B. Taylor, 'Heroic Ritual in the Old English Maxims', NM, 70 (1969), 387-407.
7. J. Strobl, 'Zur Spruchdichtung bei den Angelsachsen', Zeitschrift für deutsches Alterthum, 31 (1887), 54-64.
8. Kemp Malone, 'Notes on Gnostic Poem B of the Exeter Book', Medium Ævum, 12 (1943), 65-67.
9. Karl Schneider, 'Dichterische getarnte Begriffsrunden in der altenglische Spruchdichtung', Annali Sezione Germanica Napoli, 15 (1972), 89-126.
10. Chapter 4, pp. 133-65.
11. The Homilies of the Anglo-Saxon Church: The First Part, Containing the Sermones Catholici or Homilies of Ælfric, ed. by Benjamin Thorpe, 2 vols

(London: Ælfric Society, 1844-46), I, p. 474.

12. Larrington, p. 157 note 12, observes the context of (physical) illness: otherwise, Biggs and McEntire, S. G. Kossick, 'Gnomic Verse and Old English Riddles', UNISA English Studies, 24 (1986), 1-6 ('the blind man in lines 39-44 of Maxims I, for instance, illustrates the debilitating effect of spiritual darkness', p. 1), James W. Earl, 'Maxims I, Part I', Neophilologus, 67 (1983), 277-83 (blindness is 'a metaphor for the sinful life', p. 279). Dawson ('it turns out that the blind man is unrighteous', p. 16)—all insist on spiritual blindness or punishment.

13. Thomas D. Hill, 'Notes on the Old English Maxims I and II', NQ, 215 (1970), 445-47 (p. 445).

14. Robinson, Appositive Style, p. 45, apparently draws the same inference, quoting Psalm 96 [95]. 5.

15. Cited by Barbara C. Raw, The Art and Background of Old English Poetry (London: Edward Arnold, 1978), pp. 77-78.

16. Carl T. Berkhout, 'Four Difficult Passages in the Exeter Book Maxims', English Language Notes, 18 (1981), 247-51, notes the irony of the juxtaposition of the Cain and Abel reference with the need the lonely man has for a brother (p. 250 note 7).

17. The term and notion of an 'envelope pattern' is from Adeline Courtney Bartlett, The Larger Rhetorical Patterns in Anglo-Saxon Poetry, Columbia University Studies in English and Comparative Literature, 112 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1935).

18. 'Single Half-Lines in Old English Poetry'. NQ, 216 (1971), 442-49.

19. 'The Poetry of Cædmon', Proceedings of the British Academy, 32 (1946), 277-95 (p. 286).
20. Orality and Literacy, chapter 3, pp. 33-77 (p. 37).
21. 'A New Gnomologium: With Some remarks on Gnomic Anthologies (I) and (II)', Classical Quarterly, 44 (1950), 126-37, and 45 (1951), 1-19.
22. John R. Searle, Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), distinguishes 'brute facts' which relate to essentially physical things, and 'institutional facts' which relate to human institutions (pp. 50-53). He takes the philosophical theory further in The Construction of Social Reality (Harmondsworth: Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1995), which despite the similarity of the title with the Berger and Luckmann work referred to below, has virtually no point of overlap with that work.
23. The Dictionary of National Biography, ed. by Sir Leslie Stephen and Sir Sidney Lee (London: Oxford University Press, 1917-), I, p. 820.
24. The Old English Orosius, ed. by Janet Bately, EETS SS, 6 (London: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp. 16-18.
25. The Works of Francis Bacon, ed. by James Spedding, Robert Leslie Ellis and Douglas Denon Heath, 14 vols (London: Longman, 1857-74), I, 159.
26. Audrey L. Meaney, 'The Ides of the Cotton Gnomic poem', Medium Ævum, 48 (1979), 23-39, repr. in Damico and Olsen, pp. 158-75, and cited from this edition. Meaney suggests two possible translations for the passage, both of which have 'must seek out for herself' for 'sceal [...] gesecean' (p. 165).

27. Fell, in Christine Fell, Cecily Clark and Elizabeth Williams. Women in Anglo-Saxon England and the Impact of 1066 (London: British Museum Publications, 1984), remarks that she is 'not sure of the implications of on folce', but suggests that 'this text quite clearly urges women to independence of action' (p. 69). Joseph A. Dane, 'On Folce Gepeon: Note on the Old English "Maxims II," Lines 43-45', NM, 85 (1984), 61-64, argues that 'on folce' 'must mean "openly"' (p. 64), and construes the disputed lines 'the woman must seek her lover secretly in order to avoid the public reports that she can be bought. A woman must be secret in her actions if she wishes to maintain a good reputation' (p. 64, Dane's emphasis). Fell's suggestion that an unwanted marriage is in view seems to me to make better sense than Dane's avoidance of calumny, but both see sceal, much as Meaney does, as implying necessity or obligation. Very few of the preceding lines with sceal (on) approach necessity.

CONCLUSION

Underlying the preceding chapters is a series of questions. For Chapter 1, the main question was ‘what kind of expressions are maxims and gnomes?’, and I concluded that they are in the broadest sense ‘nomic’. Like maxims in other Old Germanic literature, they describe things, both concrete and abstract, in order to organise phenomena, society and indeed literature. The nomic character of maxims also extends to their mode of expression: it is conventional and formulaic.

Chapter 2 poses a question that has been often asked but seldom or never adequately answered, and that is, ‘what precisely are maxims?’ If maxims are conventional and formulaic, some reasonably economical account of their form ought to be available. There are several descriptions of what constitute maxims, their characteristics and style. But these focus on the accidental rather than the essential. I argue that the present-tense verb of the expressions, and the generality of their application, are definitive. But the formulaic character is also important, and I show that there are sets of maxims which have a similarity of theme and content that reveals them to be conceptually related.

At many points a definition of the maxim overlaps with a definition of the proverb. Both are, or can be, popular sayings; proverbs not infrequently use the characteristic vocabulary of maxims; often proverbs are sententious

generalisations. What then, is the difference? In Chapter 3, after reviewing the sayings that are labelled proverbs in Old English prose, I conclude that genuinely popular proverbs occur in prose, that they are used literally, and that nearly all have conceptual or syntactic parallelism. The parallelism of form enables them to develop metaphorical meanings, because parallelism invites the mapping of one set of descriptive categories onto another in a paradigmatic relationship (to use Barley's terms).

A surprisingly large number of lines of Old English poetry containing maxims have been thought by scholars to be interpolated, especially Beowulf 183b-88. The questions underlying Chapter 4 are, 'what are these lines about?', 'is the formula and system a direct borrowing?' and 'why did the Beowulf poet put these lines here?' The evidence leads me to believe that the wa / wel types of expression are not in fact calqued on the Latin beatitude / woe formula, despite the fact that they are normally used for Christian eschatological exhortation. Relating the general evidence to Beowulf, it seems to me that the poet used the formulas to recall his biblical sources and emphatically to close his excursus on the idolatry of the Danes.

Proverbs are used in striking ways in oral societies. They are authoritative guides for conduct, and express a socially sanctioned view of behaviour. People use them to motivate desirable actions, and to comment on actions and events that have already taken place. Clearly maxims are similar. Chapter 5 asks whether proverb performance theory has any relevant insights

for the understanding of maxim use. The maxims of The Battle of Maldon show not only a conventional use of maxims to motivate and encourage the characters and audience. The poet also uses the maxim as a taunt and a superstition; and in Byrhtwold's speech, attempts to make the ideal of men dying with their lord into a conventional ideal.

'Why do critics insist on interpreting the Maxims, and other parts of Old English poetry as pre-Christian?' is the question I address in Chapter 6. The answer is partly that they do not understand the form and style of the Maxims, and partly because they confuse quite separate concepts, like 'heroic' and 'pagan'. I have found just two scraps of comparative evidence which might suggest that pre-Christian concepts survive in maxims, and they are innocuous though interesting.

Finally, I address the question of the Maxims poems: what are they, and what purpose did they have? There are two answers to these questions. Firstly, the poems are very much like dozens of other wisdom literature collections: they collect and arrange and elaborate miscellaneous sayings because such sayings were valuable and interesting in themselves. Secondly, the poems reflect the world view of the ordinary Anglo-Saxon, they are the common store of everyday knowledge which the Anglo-Saxon would take for granted. Thus the poems are educational, but not in the same way as Latin grammar is educational. The material in these poems is a framework of knowledge accepted and understood by society at large, and onto which Latin

grammar, or the proper way of shooting an arrow, or any other particular accomplishment, had to be grafted.

From the perception that maxims are nomic in that they order and organise experience and society, I reach the conclusion that the Maxims poems played their part in constructing an Anglo-Saxon social reality. The difference between the two is only one of degree. But herein lies the main point of the thesis, which is that when we are dealing with a phenomenon, maxims, that is not merely rhetorically useful but obviously socially useful, some attempt to look beyond the texts to a social context is imperative. The approaches I have developed are exploratory, but they are both new and suggestive. I hope they will stimulate further work and debate.

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