

The WANDERER

Translated by
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*Though woefully toiling on wintry seas
With churning oar in the icy wave,
Homeless and helpless he fled from fate.*

Oft to the wanderer, weary of exile,
Cometh God's pity, **compassionate** love,
Though woefully toiling on wintry seas
With churning oar in the icy wave,
5 Homeless and helpless he fled from fate.
Thus saith the wanderer mindful of misery,
Grievous disasters, and death of kin:
"Oft when the day broke, oft at the dawning,
Lonely and wretched I wailed my woe.
10 No man is living, no comrade left,
To whom I dare fully unlock my heart.
I have learned truly the mark of a man
Is keeping his counsel and locking his lips,
Let him think what he will! For, woe of heart
15 Withstandeth not fate: a failing spirit
Earneth no help. Men eager for honor
Bury their sorrow deep in the breast.
"So have I also, often in wretchedness
Fettered¹ my feelings, far from my kin,
20 Homeless and hapless,² since days of old,
When the dark earth covered my dear lord's face,
And I sailed away with sorrowful heart,
Over wintry seas, seeking a gold-lord,
If far or near lived one to befriend me
25 With gift in the mead-hall and comfort for grief.
"Who bears it, knows what a bitter companion,
Shoulder to shoulder, sorrow can be,
When friends are no more. His fortune is exile,
Not gifts of fine gold; a heart that is frozen,
30 Earth's winsomeness dead. And he dreams of the hall-men,
The dealing of treasure, the days of his youth,
When his lord bade welcome to wassail³ and feast.
But gone is that gladness, and never again
Shall come the loved counsel of comrade and king.
35 "Even in slumber his sorrow assaileth,
And, dreaming he claspeth his dear lord again,
Head on knee, hand on knee, loyally laying,
Pledging his liege⁴ as in days long past.
Then from his slumber he starts lonely-hearted,
40 Beholding gray stretches of tossing sea.
Sea-birds bathing, with wings outspread,

1. **Fettered** (fet' ərd) chained; restrained.

2. **hapless** (hap' lɪs) unlucky.

3. **wassail** (wäs' əl) a toast in drinking a person's health, or a celebration at which such toasts are made.

4. **liege** (lēj) lord; sovereign.

Vocabulary

compassionate (kəm pash' en it) *adj.* sympathizing; pitying



Reading
Check

What is the wanderer's situation?

Vocabulary

rapture (rap chər) *n.* joy; great pleasure

Reading Strategy

Understand Historical

Context How does your knowledge of Anglo-Saxon life help you appreciate the mood of these lines?

Literary Analysis

Anglo-Saxon Lyrics

How are caesuras indicated on the page?

While hailstorms darken, and driving snow.
Bitterer then is the bane of his wretchedness,
The longing for loved one: his grief is renewed.
45 The forms of his kinsmen take shape in the silence:
In **rapture** he greets them; in gladness he scans
Old comrades remembered. But they melt into air
With no word of greeting to gladden his heart.
Then again surges his sorrow upon him;
50 And grimly he spurs his weary soul
Once more to the toil of the tossing sea.
“No wonder therefore, in all the world,
If a shadow darkens upon my spirit
When I reflect on the fates of men—
55 How one by one proud warriors vanish
From the halls that knew them, and day by day
All this earth ages and droops unto death.
No man may know wisdom till many a winter
Has been his portion. A wise man is patient,
60 Not swift to anger, nor hasty of speech,
Neither too weak, nor too reckless, in war,
Neither fearful nor fain,⁵ nor too wishful of wealth,
Nor too eager in vow— ere he know the event.
A brave man must bide⁶ when he speaketh his boast
65 Until he know surely the goal of his spirit.
“A wise man will ponder how dread is that doom
When all this world’s wealth shall be scattered and waste
As now, over all, through the regions of earth,
Walls stand rime-covered⁷ and swept by the winds.
70 The battlements crumble, the wine-halls decay;
Joyless and silent the heroes are sleeping
Where the proud host fell by the wall they defended.
Some battle launched on their long, last journey;
One a bird bore o’er the billowing sea:
75 One the gray wolf slew; one a grieving earl
Sadly gave to the grave’s embrace.
The Warden of men hath wasted this world
Till the sound of music and revel is stilled,
And these giant-built structures stand empty of life.
80 “He who shall muse on these moldering ruins,
And deeply ponder this darkling life,
Must brood on old legends of battle and bloodshed,
And heavy the mood that troubles his heart:
‘Where now is the warrior? Where is the war horse?

5. **fain** (fān) archaic word meaning “eager.” In this context it means “too eager.”

6. **bide** (bīd) wait.

7. **rime** (rīm)-covered covered with frost.

85 Bestowal of treasure, and sharing of feast?
Alas! the bright ale-cup, the byrny-clad⁸ warrior,
The prince in his splendor— those days are long sped
In the night of the past, as if they never had been!
And now remains only, for warriors’ memorial,
90 A wall wondrous high with serpent shapes carved.
Storms of ash-spears have smitten the earls,
Carnage of weapon, and conquering fate.
“Storms now batter these ramparts of stone;
Blowing snow and the blast of winter
95 Enfold the earth; night-shadows fall
Darkly lowering, from the north driving
Raging hail in wrath upon men.
Wretchedness fills the realm of earth,
And fate’s decrees transform the world.
100 Here wealth is fleeting, friends are fleeting,
Man is fleeting, maid is fleeting;
All the foundation of earth shall fail!”
Thus spake the sage in solitude pondering.
Good man is he who guardeth his faith.
105 He must never too quickly unburden his breast
Of its sorrow, but eagerly strive for redress;
And happy the man who seeketh for mercy
From his heavenly Father, our fortress and strength.

8. **byrny** (bər’ nē)-clad dressed in a coat of chain-mail armor.

Critical Reading

1. **Respond:** In what ways is the wanderer someone with whom you can sympathize?
2. **(a)** Who are the speakers in the poem? **(b) Analyze:** What is the relationship between the two? **(c) Analyze:** What effect does the use of two speakers have on the reader’s picture of the wanderer?
3. **(a)** Why does the wanderer go into exile? **(b) Analyze:** What images does the poet use to convey his isolation and despair?
4. **(a)** What are “the fates of men” on which the wanderer reflects? **(b) Connect:** Why might the wanderer’s own experiences have led him to such brooding thoughts?
5. **Synthesize:** According to the poem, how might reflection on “the fates of men” lead to wisdom?
6. **Evaluate:** Do you think dwelling on the sorrowful, painful side of life can give a person wisdom and a valuable perspective on life, or do you think it can be harmful? Explain.

