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How to Live: Lessons from Old English and Old Norse/Icelandic Wisdom Literature

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An Honors College Project Presented to  
the Faculty of the Undergraduate  
College of Arts and Letters  
James Madison University

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by Rhys Rene Frazier

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Accepted by the faculty of the English Department, James Madison University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Honors College.

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## Abstract

Medieval wisdom literature is a genre that is difficult to define and it has not been extensively studied. Scholarship is typically concerned with translation and manuscript emendation concerns and with identification of sources in addition to an analysis of religious influences. There has not yet been any scholarship concerned with the ways in which religious themes and concerns about life after death are meant to influence the behaviors and attitudes of the living reader. The present study seeks to analyze the ways in which the Old English poems “Maxims I,” “The Gifts of Men,” and “The Fortunes of Men,” as well as the Old Norse/Icelandic poem *Hávamál*, address questions of how individuals should live in preparation for death. Each of these poems use mortality to encourage the reader to make use of God-given gifts or acquired skills in ways that are beneficial both for individuals and for society at large. A good afterlife in each case is dependent upon the individual’s role in helping society to function smoothly and efficiently. The differences in the ways that each poem addresses the creation and maintenance of a functioning society by way of the gifts and skills of the individual—their use and misuse—and the role that the divine plays in these processes reveal notable cultural distinctions in the idea of the ideal citizen in Old English and Old Norse/Icelandic cultures.

## Introduction

This is a study of selected Old English and Old Norse texts that have been generically classified as “wisdom literature.” “Wisdom literature,” as a literary genre, is difficult to define. To say that a text expresses wisdom is to say it expresses good sense and knowledge gained through experience, but a far greater number of texts must surely fall under this definition than what are commonly labeled such. Clearly, there is also a cultural understanding of what qualifies as wisdom. We could not consider a get-rich-quick manual to be wisdom literature, for example, though it may convey good business sense gained through experience. Certain writings in the Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish canon have been referred to as wisdom literature since the late nineteenth century, including the biblical books of Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes, though there has been debate about which non-canonical works to include. There are no generic rules for distinguishing wisdom literature; instead the defining characteristic is similarities with the works already identified as wisdom literature (Breed). In the last half-century, the term has been appropriated to include a collection of Old English poetry that shares similar forms (e.g. gnomic sayings and riddles) and themes (e.g. the creation, rules for living, the nature of humanity) with these religious texts (Hansen 3, Breed).

Written in 1988, Elaine Tuttle Hansen’s study *The Solomon Complex* sets out to better understand wisdom literature that had previously been without definition in Old English. Hansen offered a succinct list of defining characteristics shared by both Biblical texts commonly defined as “wisdom,” and certain Old English texts that had come to be known as wisdom literature. These characteristics include an understanding of the poems that must be largely context-dependent; that active participation of readers in the construction of meaning is encouraged; that the poems both celebrate and function as systems by which humans organize and understand

their experiences; and that they make observations about the past in order to influence the present (11).

In this study, I will consider Old English examples of wisdom literature, as defined by Hansen. These include “Maxims I,” “The Gifts of Men,” and “The Fortunes of Men,” both individually and in comparison to the Old Norse/Icelandic Eddic poem *Hávamál*. “Maxims I” is considered a part of the canon of wisdom literature thanks to the work of T.A. Shippey.<sup>1</sup> *Hávamál*, which is similar in theme and didacticism to these Anglo-Saxon poems, if culturally different, offers a suitable complement, because despite its lack of Christian foundation, it, too, affords a context-dependent system of organizing and understanding experience that seeks to influence human behavior. Several scholars have already argued that *Hávamál* should be defined as wisdom literature, or see connections between the Old Norse/Icelandic poem and classical “wisdom” literature. These include Elizabeth Jackson, who, in her essay “Eddic Listing Techniques and the Coherence of ‘Rúnatal’,” acknowledges that the poem is intended for “the transmission of information, experience, or advice: the passing on of a culture” (81). This is in keeping with the goal of wisdom literature as expressed by Hansen, and thus provides support for including *Hávamál* as an example of the tradition. Additional articles that define the poem as wisdom literature include Lilah Grace Canevaro’s “Hesiod and *Hávamál*: Translations and the Transmission of Wisdom,” and Klaun von See’s “Disticha Catonis und *Hávamál*.”

The two Old English catalogue poems known as “The Gifts of Men” and “The Fortunes of Men” were not typically classified as wisdom literature by scholars, despite “The Fortunes of Men” appearing alongside “Maxims I” and “Maxims II” in Shippey’s book of Old English

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<sup>1</sup> “Maxims I” and the similarly named “Maxim II,” or “the Cotton Maxims,” are included in Shippey’s *Poems of Wisdom and Learning in Old English*. Maxims II is located in British Library, MS Cotton Tiberious B.i, a manuscript that also includes a copy of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles and the “Menologium.”

wisdom literature. In her 1998 study, however, Hansen made a solid case for their inclusion in the genre, arguing that they share many similarities with works considered canonical in the tradition. In particular, both “Gifts of Men” and “Fortunes of Men” include aspects that Hansen considers integral to wisdom literature, including a reflection of Old Testament creation theology and instructional stories that “should not be constructed as mimetic descriptions of actual experience. . . but as instances of the generic and the typical, chosen for their cultural significance (95-96). Each also is concerned with how individuals should live, with human nature, and with the role of the divine in human life.

Two of Hansen’s criteria for classifying a text as wisdom literature are particularly interesting when considering these four early medieval poems: that they are systems of organizing and understanding the world and that they use observations of the past intended to influence the present. Her criteria provide a common thematical base on which to begin comparative study. In all the poems, the recognition of the inevitability of death colors the understanding of the world presented by the poet. This understanding may either be made obvious, as in the cases of “Maxims I,” *Hávamál*, and “The Fortunes of Men,” or implied through a religious focus, as in the case of “The Gifts of Men.” While “Maxims I” is analyzed alongside *Hávamál* to illustrate the differences between how death was understood and used as a motivation for living well in Old English and Old Norse, the two catalogue poems show more fully to what end this motivation is employed. Preparation for death in both the Old English and the Old Norse/Icelandic poems means living well, and living well with others. Both cultures share interest in the creation of a cohesive society with productive and healthy citizens, and each does this in part through a discussion of individual “gifts” or skills. What an ideal member of society looks like, however, is not consistent from poem to poem.

“The Gifts of Men” is the most orthodox of these works in the sense that it includes the most overt Christian foundation. Theological pedagogy dominates the introduction, while the catalogue itself integrates Christian theology throughout. God is presented as the single greatest power, to the point that humans seem in some ways incapable of changing their own lives. Medieval beliefs about and understandings of free will were complicated and a subject of some theological debate, and attitudes toward and presentation of free will varies in each of the poems. In “The Gifts of Men” humans are under siege from all manner of outside influences, from God’s benevolence in His distribution of gifts to the temptations of Satan, who is linked to the negative emotions associated with taking gifts for granted and using them improperly. Humans should choose to make use of their gifts and think of them with an attitude of humble gratitude, the poet suggests, but they are unable to change what God has ordained for them. They cannot choose a different gift, or cultivate additional skills beyond those bestowed on them. Thus, humans must be content with their lot in life, which extends to a contentment with whatever social position they find themselves in. This is presumably meant to ensure a peaceful society in which everyone has a job to do and does it to the best of his or her ability. “The Gifts of Men” also seeks to answer why some individuals are more talented in certain areas than others. What we would understand as a genetic predisposition to a certain kind of activity, exemplified by the unspoken assumption that a child with two musical parents will also be musical, the poet of “The Gifts of Men” understands as divine gifts.

“The Fortunes of Men” proves less determinedly orthodox than “The Gifts of Men,” though still clearly imbued with Christian ideas. It contains an introduction and conclusion that praise God for benevolence and for the bestowal of gifts, but each is brief enough to appear

tacked on, although scholars continue to debate this.<sup>2</sup> The body of the poem contains two catalogues. The first is of deaths and misfortunes that result from expulsion or exile from society, while the second is a list of God's gifts similar to those found in "The Gifts of Men." The combination of these two catalogues serves as an encouragement for the reader to behave in such a way that he or she can remain within society and enjoy the benefits of safety and the use of God's gifts. It does not, however, prescribe any specific behaviors for doing so, though following laws and adhering to social norms may be assumed.

Humans in "The Fortunes of Men" seem to have marginally greater influence over their own lives. They are influenced by outside forces such as God, who bestows gifts, and social forces and attitudes. Humans are, however, ultimately responsible for their own place in society and for their actions. It is actions that are considered important in "The Fortunes of Men," rather than attitudes, which reflects a stronger belief in the importance of deeds than of faith, and proper behaviors are encouraged by employing the fear of death and of misfortune, rather than the motivation of a good afterlife in heaven.

The Old Norse *Hávamál* is the least orthodox of this set and allows for the greatest degree of human free will or agency among these poems. No deity bestows divine gifts; the focus instead is on skills that can be learned and advice on how to learn them is offered. Unlike "The Gifts of Men," *Hávamál* allows humans to choose to some extent what gifts they will possess, and how many, a striking difference between the Old Norse and Old English poetic positions. It is possible, and even encouraged, to cultivate any and all talents and skills in order

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<sup>2</sup> For articles that argue that the Christian themes in "The Fortunes of Men" are interpolations, see "Close to the Edge: *The Fortunes of Men* and the Limits of Wisdom Literature," by Robert DiNapoli, and "Death Appropriated in *The Fates of Men*" by Karen Swenson. For counterarguments, see Richard Dammers' "Unity and Artistry in *The Fortunes of Men*" and Stephen Jurasinski's "Caring for the Dead in *The Fortunes of Men*."

to live the best possible life, and individuals need not be content with an unsatisfactory lot in life. Individuals, fully responsible for their own health and happiness, are also responsible for the health and happiness of those around them. No deity offers assistance. *Hávamál* shows a clear lack of interest in explaining genetic difference, a distinct concern in the Old English poems, instead assuming that variety in skills is a given and focusing on how to augment what skills one may already have.

As Hansen points out, wisdom literature has typically been considered of lesser literary value compared to other Old English poems, and consequently there is not as great a wealth of scholarship on it as there is for, say, *Beowulf* (3). Much of the existing scholarship on these texts is devoted to translation, emendation, and source concerns. Though previous studies have considered how the Old English poems in particular seek to impart religious wisdom, there has not yet been a study that considers how religion may have been intended to impact secular life and maintain a functioning society. Scholars have not so far considered how each poem, in its own way, attempts to understand individual differences, steer individual development and behavior, and guide how the individual contributes to society, nor has any compared the differences between how the Old Norse and the Old English poems address such concerns. The poems discussed here were chosen because each tends to make sense of life and death in similar ways: people must learn how to develop and exercise individual skills, how to live well, and how to live well with others in a social body in anticipation of an ideal afterlife, whether that be a continuation of an individual soul in heaven or a continuation of the memory of the individual among those still living. These poems all consider how individual abilities and skills can be best used to create and maintain this functioning society, what the results are when abilities and skills are misused, and what role the divine plays in all this. The differences in the ways each poem

deals with these questions reveals the differences between what an ideal member of society looked like in Old English and Old Norse/Icelandic cultures for each poet.

In “Maxims I” and “The Gifts of Men,” one must live righteously in order to reach the Christian heaven. In “The Fortunes of Men” one must live well in order to avoid social isolation and a lonely, violent death. Finally, in *Hávamál* one must live well enough to obtain a reputation that outlasts mortal life. Individuals must use God-given gifts and their own acquired skills to live well, and in these examples, the amount of agency humans may exercise with regards to their gifts or skills is directly related to how Christianized the poem is, with the more Christianized texts tending to show a less personal agency in favor of faith in God and His will. The Old English and Old Norse/Icelandic texts selected for this study each have distinct conceptions of the afterlife and show differing beliefs in the amount of control humans have over their own lives and fates. Remarkably, despite these differences, each text’s attempt to prepare the reader for death creates a code by which humans can create and maintain a better communal life, and these codes allows for both personal fulfillment and compassion towards others.

The following study is comprised of four chapters and a conclusion. The first chapter considers ideas about life and death presented in “Maxims I” and *Hávamál*, which will become important when analyzing the ways in which religion or spirituality play a role in encouraging positive social behaviors. The second chapter turns to “The Gifts of Men” and explores God’s role in distributing gifts and the importance of using gifts correctly in maintaining an orderly society. The third chapter considers the other Old English poem, “The Fortunes of Men,” and the way that death is juxtaposed with God’s gifts in order to encourage positive social behaviors. Though more secular in tone than “The Gifts of Men,” both Old English poems rely heavily on religious themes to encourage the use of gifts in ways that will benefit society. The final chapter

returns to *Hávamál* and analyzes skills that can be considered similar to gifts listed in “The Gifts of Men” and “The Fortunes of Men.” Though the poet’s encouragement to practice behaviors that benefit society are not theological in nature, it is closely related to the importance of reputation in the Old Norse conception of the afterlife, as discussed in the first chapter. The conclusion elaborates on this point and further explores the differences in methods each poem uses to encourage pro-social behaviors, and how each results in a different image of the ideal citizen.

*Hávamál* is found most completely in the Codex Regius, a compilation of works written down by an unknown scribe in the late thirteenth century. It contains both Snorri Sturluson’s Prose Edda and the Poetic Edda, of which the 164 stanzas of *Hávamál* are part. Contents include mythological stories, heroic legends, and other pre-Christian materials. While presented in the Codex as one poem, textual scholars believe that *Hávamál* is a combination of six separate poetic fragments that were grouped together when the Codex Regius was created.

The scholarship on *Hávamál* addresses a variety of themes, often focused on specific sections in the longer work (e.g. *The Lay of Loddfafnir*, Odin’s list of runes, and the imbedded story of the mead of poetry). Relevant literature includes Elizabeth Jackson’s “Eddic Listing Techniques and the Coherence of ‘Rúnatal,’” and Stephanie Fishwick’s “Crossing Thresholds: The Relationship between Knowledge, Power and Death in *Hávamál*.” Jackson defines *Hávamál* as wisdom literature and considers the unity of particular catalogues, while Fishwick is more thematically useful for the present study. Fishwick makes the argument for life being the greatest good presented in *Hávamál* (as opposed to an afterlife with God, espoused in the Old English poems). The emphasis on life over an afterlife in heaven is one of the differences between the Old English poems and *Hávamál* which will be discussed in this study.

The poems “The Gifts of Men,” “The Fortunes of Men,” and “Maxims I” are found in the Exeter Book, a collection of chiefly Christian poems written in Old English by an anonymous compiler, most likely a monk. The manuscript was compiled around the second half of the tenth century and given to the Exeter Cathedral by Leofric (1016-1072), first bishop of Exeter, around 1050. The date of each work’s original composition is unclear, as the poems would have likely been handed down orally for generations before the compilers, most likely a monk in the case of each text, recorded them in writing. Consequently, there is much debate around which parts of each poem are pre-Christian, and which parts represent later additions, particularly in the case of “The Fortunes of Men.”

Scholarship on “Maxims I” deals primarily with translation issues and identification of sources. Several scholars analyze symbolism found both in “Maxims” and throughout Germanic medieval literature in an effort to understand cultural influences on the poems. John D. Niles’ essay “Sign and Psyche in Old English Poetry” and Brian O’Camb’s essay “Isidorean Wolf Lore and the *felaƿæcne deor* of Maxims I.C: Some Rhetorical and Legal Contexts for Recognising Another Old English wulf in Sheep's Clothing” are useful examples of this approach. Elizabeth Jackson also shows interest in identifying possible influences on “Maxims” and on catalogue poems as a genre, and analyzes similarities between poetic structure in Old Norse and Old English catalogue poems as the groundwork for a future study. The essay, “‘Not Simply Lists’: An Eddic Perspective on Short-Item Lists in Old English Poems,” is notable in that it analyzes all of the poems discussed in this paper, though her argument is unrelated to the present argument. Rather than compare themes within these and other short-item catalog poems, she focuses on their poetic structure in order to argue in favor of their unity and structural complexity.

Since the 1960s there have been approximately a dozen articles published pertaining to “The Gifts of Men,” including a critical edition by E.G. Stanley. While some scholarship takes up translation and emendation issues as well as identification of sources, there are several notable exceptions. These exceptions deal largely with the origins of the poems’ ideas. Geoffrey Russom places “Gifts of Men” in a pre-Christian Germanic context, arguing that the orthodox introduction and conclusion, which focus on God’s role in the distribution of gifts, are later additions. J. E. Cross and Douglas Short, on the other hand, argue for a unified Christian poem based in scriptural sources. Cross discusses the popular *Homilia* of Gregory the Great, which contains an interpretation of the Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25), and the Gregory’s interpretation’s translation into Old English by Ælfric. Cross notes Gregory’s interpretation of the monetary talents as symbolic of spiritual and worldly gifts, and argues that these gifts are similar to those found in “The Gifts of Men, including the presence of “early possessions and familiarity with a rich man” in both (Cross 66, 67). Short accepts the Parable of the Talents as a likely source for the catalogue of gifts that forms the body of the poem, but argues in addition that the pedagogical theme of Gregory the Great’s *Pastoral Care* matches most closely the rhetorical theme expressed in the introduction and conclusion. He argues that the poet must have been familiar with *Pastoral Care*’s pedagogy and is applying it to “The Gifts of Men” via the introduction, which uses different methods to encourage moderation by both the gifted and the unfortunate.

Scholarship about “The Fortunes of Men” is somewhat more abundant than is the case for “The Gifts of Men,” yet much of it deals with similar considerations, such as translation and emendation concerns and identification of sources. However, more attention is paid to the origins of the ideas contained in “The Fortunes of Men” and to the overall unity of the poem.

Considerations of unity are perhaps to be expected given the fact that the poem consists of two discrete catalogues — one listing various misfortunes and deaths and another listing gifts, the latter similar to the body of “The Gifts of Men.” How scholars interpret the poem’s unity generally coincides with their opinions on whether the poem was written as a didactic Christian work originally, or whether its origins are pre-Christian and the lines that mention God and the orthodox Christian conclusion constitute later additions.

Among the scholars who consider “The Fortunes of Men” a unified Christian poem are Richard H. Dammers and Stefan Jurasinski. Both argue that the poem is part of the soul-and-body tradition, which emphasizes death and bodily destruction as an encouragement to repent sins. Karen Swenson, Robert DiNapoli, and Lindy Brady offer opposing arguments for “The Fortunes of Men” as not a single unified poem, but likely a mixture of pre-Christian fragments with later Christian additions. Karen Swenson, whose view Jurasinski argues explicitly against, interprets the description of deaths not as a part of the soul-and-body tradition, but as descriptions of various pre-Christian rituals, and analyzes these differences to argue for the poem’s disunity. DiNapoli argues for the poem’s disunity on a marked absence of theological themes in the catalogue of misfortunes and deaths, and the brief, generic nature of all mentions of God within the poem. Brady’s argument assumes the disunity between two halves of the poem, treating “each as worthy of study in its own right,” but focuses her interpretation on the death catalogue (326). She considers the location of the deaths, and argues that all deaths described are notably marked by either expulsion from society or danger that comes from within society itself.

## Chapter One

### **“Dead Men Do No Deeds”: Attitudes Towards Life and Death in the Old Norse *Hávamál* and the Old English “Maxims I”**

“Maxims I” and *Hávamál* are both examples of early gnomic medieval wisdom literature. The Old Norse/Icelandic *Hávamál* is a part of Snorri Sturluson’s Poetic Edda, and is found most completely in the thirteenth-century Codex Regius. It is generally accepted that *Hávamál* is comprised of several different poem fragments, though there is some debate over where separation between fragments occurs. “Maxims I” is found in the Exeter Book, written during the second half of the tenth century and gifted to the Exeter Cathedral in 1050. It is typically divided into three parts. The first challenges the reader to join in a dialogue exchanging wisdom and gives advice about how to live, the second emphasizes the processes of the natural world and elevates God as their cause, and the third explores man’s place in the world and in society. It is unclear when the works contained in the Exeter Book or the Codex Regius were originally composed, as they were likely passed down orally before being recorded. Both “Maxims I” and *Hávamál* share themes of gifts and skills, courage, wisdom, moral guidance, and how to live a good life, but both poems also consider how living a good life will impact what happens to an individual after death. Christian ideas evident in “Maxims I” are not so in *Hávamál*, even though Norse regions were Christianized well before the Codex Regius was copied. This may indicate that the materials in it are older in origin, but it may also indicate a poet whose ideas about living were shaped less by religion and more by secular culture. Thus, the compilers emphasized different ideas on the relationship between life and death and on the purpose of life. Those ideas, I will show, suggest that Anglo-Saxons and Norse, at least in the poems, did not share compatible ideas about human behavior.

Among *Hávamál*'s many and varied stanzas about caution, speech and silence, generosity, and friendship is this particularly pointed discussion:

Better to live than to be lifeless:  
the living can hope for a cow.  
While the wealthy man sat warm by his fire,  
a dead man lay outside the door. (20)<sup>3</sup>

The stanza clearly establishes that life is preferable to death, a point noted by Fishwick in

“Crossing Thresholds: The Relationship between Knowledge, Power and Death in *Hávamál*.”

While one is alive, even if one is poor, one's needs might be met. One can “hope for a cow.” One can enjoy the pleasures of living, such as the warmth of a fire on a cold night. Death, however, arrests the hope of wealth and the enjoyment of warmth. It is better to live without wealth and comfort and have the hope of them than to die, after which such options are gone. This is the first of a number of verses that speaks to a fundamental belief in the value of life. The verses address the value of living even if one suffers disability, and they speak specifically to the value of one's reputation which lives on after death. There is no notion of an afterlife as a Christian Anglo-Saxon would conceive of it: stories of the god Odin are present (23-26, 31-34), but there is no instance in *Hávamál* of a human residing with the gods after death, an idea typically represented as Valhalla. Thus, it is not an afterlife which is valued, but the afterlife of a man's deeds, and if one is alive, he can still perform deeds regardless of disability:

The lame ride horseback, the handless drive herds,  
The deaf may be dauntless in battle;  
Better to be blind than burned on a pyre,  
Dead men do no deeds. (20)

Disabilities are seen in *Hávamál* as something that can and should be overcome. A lame person can ride a horse, retaining mobility, self-reliance, and agency. The maimed can work for

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<sup>3</sup> All quotations from *Hávamál* are from Patricia Terry's translation of *Poems of the Elder Edda*.

their livelihood regardless of their physical limitations, as in the case of the one who is handless who can still drive herds. The deaf can perform valiantly in battle, earning renown and perhaps treasure. Even the blind, who would be unable to ride, work the field, or go into battle, are in a better position than the dead, who are “burned on a pyre” (20). A dead man can do nothing, but even the blind may earn a reputation for wisdom or become a poet, accomplishments which require no eyes, but a sound mind and working tongue.

This passage highlights the importance of deeds, which can only be performed in life. There is always the opportunity to gain glory in some way, despite whatever physical imitations a person might have. This fact shows that a physical disability does not affect a person’s worth or ability to do deeds through which he can earn renown. The only ones described in the stanza as unable to “do deeds” are the dead. The stanza reinforces the point that life is preferable to death, because it is still possible to act while one is alive, regardless of physical condition or personal circumstances.

It is vitally important to be able to exercise agency and “do deeds,” because a person’s actions are all that remain after death. Nowhere in *Hávamál* does the speaker mention life after death; instead, he emphasizes that it is the memory of an individual’s deeds that remain as a testament to his life, passed down through stories. It is said:

Cattle die, kinsmen die,  
One day you will die yourself;  
I know one thing that never dies—  
The dead man’s reputation. (21)

It is not the soul that is recognized as the only thing that will survive when cattle, kinsman, and the individual die, as is the case in Christianized Old English wisdom poetry, but the reputation that the dead person leaves behind on earth. The point is further supported in the

lines, “words of praise will not perish / when a man wins fair fame” (21). Thus, it is necessary to do deeds that will win renown while one is alive to ensure that one’s reputation will pass down through the subsequent generations and grant a kind of eternal life. In this way, even though life is superior to death, it is important to prepare for death. Deeds are not just about actions, but also about legacy. One’s progeny will not only carry the memory of the actions their father has done, but also his very name. The child may retain the father’s property as well in land and goods that indicate the status of the departed and contribute to the status of descendants. It is those later kinsmen that will remember the deeds their forefathers did and continue to tell stories of them after their death.

Because of this, the best way to prepare for death, after the individual ensures that he remains active and maintains a good reputation, is to leave descendants behind to remember him:

Though to be born when you are buried,  
It’s better to have a son;  
You don’t see many memorial stones  
Except those set by kinsmen. (20)

Since the only sort of life after death mentioned in *Hávamál* is the life that one has in the memories of others, it is, of course, important that someone remember you. Leaving behind descendants is important not only to carry on the family name, but to carry on the memory of dead ancestors and make sure that they are not forgotten. This vision is one that speaks to a kind of shared memory that is extended through family and friends. What one does in life thus matters above all things because “death” in this view is the end of memory. The memory can continue indefinitely if one has done deeds and has progeny to remember those deeds.

Overall, the wisdom presented in *Hávamál* suggests a worldview centered around life and the living, with a great tolerance of disability. Life is considered superior to death regardless of

whether or not one has the best quality of life. It is better to live in poverty than not to live at all, because as long as one is living there is hope to improve one's station, and it is still possible to enjoy simple pleasures such as the warmth of a fire (20). Even when preparing for death, it is life on earth that is emphasized, rather than life after death. To prepare for death is to earn a good enough reputation to be remembered by those who are still living, and by producing heirs who will remember an individual and his deeds after he has passed away. Any sort of life after death for an individual soul is never mentioned, and the omission suggests that it is what one does with one's life that is valued.

There is a lack of strong Christian influence in the view of life and death expressed in *Hávamál*, even though Iceland officially converted to Christianity several hundred years before the Codex Regius was written. The fact that *Hávamál's* passages about death do not reflect more Christian themes suggests that the composer was either not Christian, (or not Christianized to the point of acknowledging a Christian afterlife), perhaps had an interest in preserving the old pagan beliefs of the composer's ancestors untinged by Christian theology, or understood human behavior less from a religious than from a secular perspective.

"Maxims I" is found in the Exeter Book date from approximately the second half of the tenth century, around three hundred years earlier than it is thought *Hávamál* was written down. It, too, deals with practical themes such as generosity, the roles of men and women, the nature of kings, preparation for the unexpected, how to live morally, and of course, life and death. The view of death presented in "Maxims I" is one of impending loss that must be kept ever present in the mind. The first mention of death in "Maxims I" is "mortal man must needs die and every day

take steps with regard to his severance from the world” (“Maxims I” 346).<sup>4</sup> Death is natural and unavoidable, but the phrase “severance from the world” suggests boundaries between the living and the dead as well as loss of worldly comforts to which one has become attached. One must “every day take steps” to prepare for such a loss. Like *Hávamál*, “Maxims I” acknowledges the natural order – all men die. It also indicates that the focus of life must be the preparation for death, though “Maxims I” states outright that death must always be on the minds of the living in order that they prepare for it. Whereas there is a clear preference for life shown in *Hávamál*, “Maxims I” encourages a greater acceptance of death through this outright call for daily contemplation and preparation. Life, then, is not shown as preferable or inferior to death, but is considered preparatory to it. The emphasis on death and what comes after in “Maxims I” means that preparing for death is important, not in terms of what remains of an individual on earth, but for the individual’s experience of the afterlife.

The difference in the method of preparation is highlighted by the “Maxims I” composer’s view of how adversity in life should be handled. In the case of a disability such as blindness, it is said that “the Ruler ordained for him this torment: he can grant him relief, the dealing of his head’s jewels, if he knows the heart to be pure” (347). Presumably it was believed that God could literally grant sight to the blind, as Jesus does in the Bible, so the best way to deal with a physical disability is to maintain a pure heart in hopes that God will grant a cure; one gives up individual agency in favor of trust in God. This is a major difference from *Hávamál*, which presents the view of disabilities as mere limitations on certain activities and not hinderances to life, emphasizing the importance of personal agency in spite of these limitations. The passage of

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<sup>4</sup> All quotations for “Maxims I” are from the prose translation given by S. A. J. Bradley in *Anglo Saxon Poetry*. Page numbers are given in the in-text citations.

“Maxims I” can also be viewed metaphorically, though: one who lacks understanding is often thought of as “blind,” and so God’s ability to grant understanding to one who previously lacked it can be seen as granting sight to the blind. A physical disability can then be thought of in several different ways: on one hand, it serves as a metaphor for a theological lesson, while on the other, if it is literal, the solution the Old English wisdom poetry gives is to have a “pure heart” and to put one’s difficulties in God’s hands in hopes of healing (347). This advice is rooted in the Christian belief in an omnipotent God who is the ultimate source of aid, rather than in the belief that one must do whatever one can while alive in order to be remembered after death. This also leaves room in “Maxims I” for an expression of hope for positive change not present in *Hávamál*, in which one accepts the lot one has been given and must make the best of it.

Because the Christianized Old English “Maxims I” clearly show the importance of putting faith in God’s power rather than in the individual will, the manner of preparation for death differs accordingly. The composer of “Maxims I” says, “Foolhardy is the man who does not know his Lord, so often does death come unpremeditated. Wise men will guard their souls: they will maintain their righteousness with rectitude” (346-347). Actions during life are still seen as important, since one must maintain righteousness to go to heaven after death, but it is not necessary to do especially memorable or valiant deeds that will earn a place in stories that keep a memory alive. What matters, then, as it does not in *Hávamál*, is that deeds must be directed toward belief in God. The key to preparation for death espoused in “Maxims” is a combination of faith in the power of God, which results in a reduced emphasis on personal agency, and deeds centered around that faith.

The deeds that are considered important are not always as active as the ones lauded in *Hávamál*. Among the deeds praised in “Maxims I” are generosity (350), justice, righteousness,

problem-solving without violence (346), self-control over anger, and courage in convictions (347). These deeds are based more on living the Christian values found in the Bible, and thus demonstrating faith in God through the way one lives. More traditionally pagan deeds also come up throughout, and perhaps show where the old pagan wisdom mixed with the newer, Christianized ideals of how to live, although how to read evidence of pagan beliefs is contested by scholars. Along with advice to be courageous in convictions, one must also be courageous in battle (347). Both seem to harken back to the same roots as *Hávamál*, with its emphasis on reputation. Such observations only form a minor part of “Maxims I,” though, and most deeds are centered in ideals of how Christian faith should be shown.

Unlike the writer of *Hávamál*, the “Maxims I” composer is solidly Christian and espouses in these wisdom verses a Christian theology. Since the Christian God is so present in the worldview expressed in “Maxims I,” it makes sense that there would be mention of a life for an individual soul, rather than just the memory of an individual, after death. Life after death is explicitly mentioned in “Maxims I”, as it is not in *Hávamál*. Death is acknowledged as unknowable to humans, for “the ordaining Lord alone knows where death will go when it departs hence out of our ken” (346), but faith in God allows the poet to conceive of an afterlife despite anxiety of the unknown. This notion is well-represented in Bede’s notion that a sparrow flying through a mead hall represents the soul’s mysterious journey from the unknown into the world and on into the unknown (II.13.<sup>5</sup> It is said that God is “the very King of truth, the Savior of souls, who gave us all that we live on and who at the end will again dispose over all mankind” (346). God is clearly established as a benevolent ruler, since He is the “Savior of souls” and has provided for humans throughout their lives. That He will continue to “dispose over,” or to direct

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<sup>5</sup> Bede. *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. Penguin, 1991. Book II.13.

and care for humans after they die, shifts the poet's presentation of death from one of frightening mystery to one where a benevolent "King" provides safety and comfort. The vision of the afterlife shown in *Hávamál* must lie in the known realm of earth, in the form of memories and stories. Because the more Christianized "Maxims I" composer can imagine a life for the individual, however mysterious, after death, the same emphasis is not placed on having offspring who will carry on one's legacy. It is through faith in the goodness of the "Savior of souls" that the afterlife can be considered positive (346).

Death can also be considered positive in relation to life because of trust in God. In the same section where death is first mentioned, the composer says, "New-born complements when disease first takes away; thus there are just as many of the human race in the world, nor would there be a limit to the progeny upon earth if he did not diminish it who established the universe" ("Maxims I" 346). Death is established as something that is, in fact, positive in its own way: it prevents overpopulation, and each death is made up for by the life of a newborn child. It is God, the one "who established the universe," that brings about death in order to maintain the balance on earth, and therefore death is nothing to be feared because it is God's will.

While both *Hávamál* and "Maxims I" focus on the goal of life in preparation for death, each suggests a different method of preparation. In "Maxims I," it is vital to prepare for the judgement of God in hopes of gaining entrance to heaven. This is done through righteous deeds that show faith in God and through faith itself, with a focus on God's will rather than the strength of the individual. *Hávamál*, which demonstrates no belief in life after death, has a world-view much more rooted in the earthly. Preparation for death must include valiant deeds and reproduction so that there will be offspring to remember the dead. While both focus on deeds of a sort, the Christianized "Maxims" indicate that the goal in life is to live well in order to go to

heaven upon death, while in *Hávamál*, the goal is to live memorably, so that one's legacy survives on earth.

It is important to note that while *Hávamál* contains more traditional pagan wisdom, it was copied some three hundred years after the more Christianized "Maxims." This could be due to the fact that England began converting to Christianity around the beginning of the seventh century, while Iceland did not convert, and even then more in name than spirit, until the end of tenth century. Both the pagan views expressed in *Hávamál* and the Christianized view shown in "Maxims" may have played a role in the differences between the two societies, and perhaps in how each viewed the other. "Maxims" emphasizes Christian morality and the appropriate behavior for expressing it, while *Hávamál* favors individual glory and memorability. Anglo-Saxon culture may then have been considered contemptible by the medieval Icelanders, to whom the emphasis on forgiveness, righteousness, and non-violence whenever possible may have been equated with a forfeiture of status, power, and reputation. Icelandic culture, reciprocally, may have seemed vain and excessively violent to the Christian Anglo-Saxons, whose idea of the ideal way to live prefers self-control and temperance to violence used to gain status. There is some evidence to support these conclusions in the historical accounts of conflict between the two cultures, particularly between the ninth and tenth centuries. Yet other Old English poems do not show such a clear distinction. As the next chapter will show, the Old English poem "The Gifts of Men" does not praise only spiritually righteous behaviors, but praises a variety of gifts, from skill in battle to skill at drinking. Even gifts that at first seem to have little to do with spirituality come from God, and it is through appreciating God's gifts and using them in a way that benefits society that one can prove his righteousness.

## Chapter Two

### God's Gifts: Moderating Jealousy and Pride in the Old English "The Gifts of Men"

There is relatively little scholarship about "The Gifts of Men," one of the less-recognized examples of wisdom literature, most of which takes up issues of translation, emendation, and identification of sources. Relevant exceptions deal with the origins of the ideas contained within the poem. Geoffrey Russom places "Gifts of Men" in a pre-Christian Germanic context, arguing that the orthodox introduction and conclusion, which focus on God's role in the distribution of gifts, are later additions. He draws parallels between the gifts in "Gifts of Men," *Beowulf*, and the Old Norse poem *Hávamál* to argue that the talents in "Gifts of Men" are representative of aristocratic Germanic pastimes. While many of the talents no doubt would have been attributed to the aristocracy and may have roots in Germanic customs, this view fails to acknowledge the apparently seamless transitions between the explicitly Christian introduction and conclusion and the catalogue portion of the poem.<sup>6</sup>

J. E. Cross and Douglas Short take an opposing view, arguing for a unified Christian poem based in scriptural sources. Cross discusses the popular *Homilia* of Gregory the Great, which contains an interpretation of the Parable of the Talents found in Matthew 25, and the interpretation's translation into Old English by Ælfric. The Parable tells of three men, each given a certain amount of currency measured in talents by their master for safekeeping. One man is given five talents, another two, and the last, a single talent. The men with five and two talents take them out into the world, trade them, and double the amount that they have, so that when

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<sup>6</sup> This does not seem to be purely the work of the translator, as Liuzza's translation of "The Fortunes of Men" does not show comparably smooth transitions between sections of the poem. "The Fortunes of Men" will be discussed further in the following chapter.

their lord returns they return twice what they were entrusted with, while the third man buries his single talent and returns it when the time comes. He is reprimanded and condemned to “exterior darkness” for failing to multiply the talents entrusted to him (Matt. 25.14-30). Gregory the Great interprets the monetary talents given by the lord as spiritual gifts given by Jesus Christ, with each number of talents symbolizing different kinds of spiritual gifts. Cross notes the similarities between the gifts that Gregory tells are meant by the talents from the Parable and those in “Gifts of Men,” including the presence of “early possessions and familiarity with a rich man” in both (Cross 66, 67). Short accepts the Parable of the Talents as a likely source for the catalogue of gifts that forms the body of the poem, but argues in addition that the pedagogical theme of Gregory the Great’s *Pastoral Care* matches most closely the rhetorical theme expressed in the introduction and conclusion. *Pastoral Care* instructs prelates and teachers to teach the same material to all, but to encourage groups of learners according to their spiritual needs, just as the poet of “Gifts of Men” calls the unfortunate to hope and the powerful to humility in the introduction. Given the prevalence of the pedagogical style advocated in *Pastoral Care*, Short argues that the poet must have been familiar with it and is applying the pedagogic theory to a didactic catalogue poem.

While much of the available scholarship focuses on issues of origin or translation, none of the current scholarship considers at length the role that the ideas in “The Gifts of Men” play in the creation of a functioning society. The poem functions not just as a retelling of the Parable of the Talents, but also considers the skills and abilities it lists to be equally important by presenting them all without distinction in a list format; the poet’s style has social implications. The society encouraged by “The Gifts of Men” is thus one in which all can be content with their lot in life because all are shown as privileged in some way. If this is the case, there is no cause for

rebellion against God for failing to provide gifts adequate to a worthwhile life because all gifts are equally worthy. There is also no need to rebel against the social order, since everyone is given prowess in a certain area, no more or less important than any other since all talents come from God. A farmer, then, should be satisfied with his ability to reap a successful harvest, and devote his energy to performing the task he is suited for rather than seeking advancement beyond his station or lamenting the lack of any other skill.

The body of “The Gifts of Men” is framed by an introduction and conclusion which encourage men to be content with God’s benevolent distribution of gifts. The introduction begins with the optimistic proclamation that all men on earth are given gifts by God “easily seen by anyone with spirit” (2).<sup>7</sup> The poet asserts that God has the power to grant gifts to “each person among the people” (6-7). Even the least impressive man, “meager in achievement” (9) “small-minded,” or “slow-witted” (10), has some sort of gift. God bestows such gifts, the poet tells us, “lest [man] should despair in whatever works / he might bring about in this worldly life / or in every gift” (14-16). Just as God allows all men at least one gift to prevent despair, He also limits the number of gifts given to any one man “lest the strong-minded man, full of splendid gifts, / might turn from moderation and grow proud, and then despise the more poorly endowed” (18-29). Thus, God has exclusive power over the granting of gifts of men, but men seem to have power to respond to the gifts given. The poet, therefore, may indicate a degree of human free will, if not power over skills. The poem itself calls the reader to recognize that he or she has at least one kind of skill no matter how unimportant it may seem, and the structure of the list encourages the reader to consider a skill like being a “good beer keeper,” one who can

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<sup>7</sup> All quotations for “The Gifts of Men” are from the translation provided by R. M. Liuzza in *Old English Poetry: An Anthology*.

presumably drink without getting drunk, just as worthy as being a “builder,” two gifts listed side-by-side (75). Additionally, the poet emphasizes in the conclusion that the way God dispenses gifts is “worthy,” concluding “Glory be unto Him forever, / and luminous praise” (111-112). This encourages the reader to recognize God’s wisdom and to join the poet in appreciation and praise of it. The fact that the poet attempts to persuade the reader that all gifts are equally worthy and that God dispenses them intentionally for the best effect means that the poet must believe that humans are capable of being persuaded — in other words, that they can choose to perceive of themselves as fortunate, and choose to adopt a grateful attitude. Humans are thus accountable for their attitudes but not for the gifts that may influence those attitudes. God is a benevolent parent figure, taking an active interest in the growth of His children and protecting them from extreme reactions through the act of dispensing gifts.

The closing section of the poem, lines 97-113, reiterates the opening claim that no one person is given all gifts, “lest pride injure him, / or his heart grow haughty because of his greatness,” but further complicates the view of free will presented (100-101). Pride is personified as an external force, that can “injure” or that can itself exert control over humans, rather than one that is generated from within. Because of the human tendency to be ruled by such external “forces,” including emotions that are difficult to control, God must wield the power of gifts as a counterbalance to protect humans from the twin emotions of pride and despair — and help them to achieve moderation (104-105). The description of God apportioning his gifts to arm humans against pride reinforces the view that humans are influenced more by external forces than by their own will, since God Himself acts as an influential external force. The concern over pride and despair indicate that such negative emotions are a means by which humans follow the path of the Devil: pride is recognized as the sin of the Devil, which led to his other sins and resulted

in his expulsion from heaven according to the Christian tradition, while despair is linked with suicide, which is in direct conflict with the biblical commandment against murder. God is an opposing warrior, combatting such “devilish” and destructive emotions by distributing gifts to men. In this view humans themselves are not presented as having minimal ability to direct their own lives, but even their perceptions of their lives are heavily influenced by the demonic and holy powers that are in conflict. It is in the narrow space between these opposing forces that humans can experience free will, by choosing to direct attention either to God’s influence or to the Devil’s. By contemplating God’s benevolent role in distributing gifts rather than dwelling on either deficiencies, which can lead to despair, or the gifts themselves, which can lead to pride, individuals can choose to adopt an attitude of appreciation and humility. Individuals thus have a kind of agency with regard to their attitudes, but not their abilities, as they do in *Hávamál*.

That God distributes gifts to prevent reactions of pride and despair and to mediate human extremes suggests a Christian poet who values both humility and hope. Those that have several gifts or gifts that are more traditionally lauded in heroic works, such as skill in battle, must remember that all things are not “under one person’s power,” while the claim that no man is completely denied “some skill of mind or strength of deeds” gives one who may have fewer or only “minor” talents hope (23, 12). The mixing of skills such as hunting, gambling, fighting, and beer-drinking with the more artistic — musicianship and carpentry, for example — also sends the message that all gifts are equally valuable, which should also mediate pride or despair that could arise from a perception of unequal gift distribution. Geoffrey Russom argues that the gifts listed are associated with the aristocracy. If that were the case (and the aristocrats were presumably the audience), it is also possible that the poet means to suggest that the reader not worry if those in lower social ranks are either dissatisfied with their lives or grow cocky. In this

view it is simply human nature, and a thane or king should not be concerned because it takes the power of God to tailor situations to avoid such tendencies. It may be a stretch to rely too heavily on Russom's article, however, as much of his argument about the "Gifts of Men" hinges on support drawn from Old Norse rather than Old English sources. While both are, as he says, "Germanic cultures," the societies of Iceland and Britain were decidedly unique, and some of the skills listed in "Gifts of Men," such as gambling, drinking, and having a "steadfast spirit" are not gifts limited to the aristocratic class (80). In his analysis Russom mixes the cultures in ways that blur the differences between the two that this study seeks to identify. It seems more likely that the "Gifts of Men" contains a mixture of gifts aimed at different classes of people, as Short argues. Regardless of social class, the equal treatment of diverse gifts suggests that maintaining a positive attitude and using the gift that one has been given is more to be valued than any particular kind of gift.

To consider how one purpose of the poem is to list skills essential to an ideal society, I will now turn to the body of the poem, where the various gifts are catalogued. The poem's body can be divided in several ways but generally includes generosity, wealth, wisdom, strength, beauty, and artistry. The body of the poem can be divided into eight sections: lines 30-36 include several different kinds of gift, making it difficult to categorize; lines 36-43 and 51-52, competitive physical activities; lines 44-50 and 53-57, practical or lucrative skills; lines 58-66, gifts that can earn one a good reputation; lines 67-73, skills requiring a cool head and discipline; lines 74-85, social gifts; and lines 86-96, religious gifts.

Section one lists the variety of gifts that God might bestow, but the breadth is difficult to categorize, including wealth, wisdom, physical strength, beauty, and poetic skill (30-36). Such gifts are chiefly rooted in the secular realm. Wealth is earned while living, strength and beauty

fail with age, and though a poet's words survive after his or her death, they are creations of the living. The section also explains that gifts can be balanced by deficiencies. For example: "One is unfortunate, / a hapless hero, and yet he is wise / in the mind's skill" (31-33). Even though a man is not gifted with luck or, as implied, physical prowess, he is gifted with mental prowess.

Humans are both flawed and talented, possessing some skills but lacking others, a distributional inequality that the poet argues prevents either despair or hubris. The last attribute of the "hapless hero" is that he is "wise in the mind's skill," and in Liuzza's translation this is the attribute that is grammatically emphasized through the use of "and yet" [biþ hwæpre] implying an emphasis on ability over deficiency. By emphasizing individual capacity over limitations, the poet seems to be encouraging the reader to acknowledge and take pleasure in the gifts God has given him. Yet at the same time, that deficiency is acknowledged at all is a reminder to remain humble in the face of the skills one still lacks rather than "turn[ing] from moderation and grow[ing] proud" (25).<sup>8</sup>

The next set of skills, lines 36-43, might be characterized as both intellectually and physically competitive. It includes readiness of speech and the ability to argue law, to fight "in battle when shields crash together" and in the "hunting of beasts" (36, 41-43, 40, 38). The exercise of these skills requires direct competition. Readiness of speech is useless if not

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<sup>8</sup> Interpretation of this passage depends on translation. In Old English the passage is *sum bið wonspedig, / hearsælig hæle, bið hwæpre gleaw, / modes cræfta*. R. M Liuzza calls the man a "hapless hero," preserving the original alliteration and implying that the man is unfortunate or luckless. If this translation is accepted, it can be further said that the poet conveys the possibility that anyone may be distinguished for the skills one possesses, regardless of one's flaws. The translation provided by Stanley, however, reads "unhappy man," which does not show the same hope for something more than ordinary. In addition, it highlights unhappiness and not a lack of luck, possibly to be interpreted as discontent rather than general misfortune, and thus treats unhappiness as a deficiency. Happiness or contentment is then presented as the ideal. This perhaps fits the tone of the rest of the poem more aptly as well, since God is said to issue gifts in such a way that represses both dissatisfaction and hubris, and the poet calls for praise of God in response to "the worthy way the Lord scatters / His gifts far and wide" (110-111)

employed in persuasion and debate, or if practiced without an audience. Martial or hunting skills are inherently competitive. Each form of competition can bring individual renown for besting others in the appropriate field of battle. One must prove to be an intimidating debater, a fierce warrior, or a cunning hunter by comparison.

God also grants skills in crafts, such as carpentry and musicianship (lines 44-50 and 53-57). He gifts the carpenter with the “trained” hand necessary “to build a hall” (45, 47), and allows skill to the one who “can take up the harp in his hands, / and guide the quick sounds of the glee-wood” (49-50). Swimming, jewelry-making, and blacksmithing (lines 58-66) are practical and functional.

When Unferth challenges Beowulf’s ability as a warrior, it is his ability at swimming that is at issue and of which Beowulf boasts to prove his worth (*Beowulf* 530-586). He tells of his five-night competition with Brecca, both fully clad in armor and bearing swords. On the fifth night a storm separates them and Beowulf battles sea monsters, slaying nine, “and since that day / they never hindered the passage of any / sea-voyager” (567-569). Beowulf is such a strong swimmer that he can remain on the open sea for nearly a week, fully armored, and still win a battle with sea monsters and live to recount the tale. Brecca’s win is technical, not real, since Beowulf’s is the more impressive feat, and the story helps convince the Danes to view Beowulf as a capable warrior. It is not just any battle he recounts, but a battle in which he is literally out of his element, in the water instead of on land. Thus, being a strong swimmer shows particular strength, a gift according to “The Gifts of Men,” and Beowulf’s battle with sea monsters proves his bravery and attests to his preparation for facing Grendel’s mere. The tale of his aquatic feats bolsters his reputation with the Danes, but also the reputation of the Geatish people, whom he represents. It is interesting to note that in the context of the epic, martial skills and skills with

swimming are combined, allowing Beowulf multiple gifts as discussed in “The Gifts of Men,” rather than one in which he is particularly skilled in. Though Beowulf does have multiple gifts, the caution in “The Gifts of Men” against such a man “turn[ing] from moderation and grow[ing] proud” is also present in *Beowulf* (25). Hrothgar acknowledges Beowulf as one whose glory is “exalted throughout the world, over every people,” marking him as one who is more gifted and thus more susceptible to pride (1704-1705). He warns him against becoming like Heremod, who had numerous gifts but fought his own men and jealously refused to give them treasures and rings, as was custom. Thereby Hrothgar provides an example of the kind of man that Beowulf should strive not to become and shows the result of the pride cautioned against in “The Gifts of Men” (1709-1723). In a catalogue that recalls the body of “The Gifts of Men,” Hrothgar recounts the many gifts that a man might have while on earth, such as “wisdom, land, and lordship,” and how this might lead to pride, and subsequently greed and wrath (1726-1452). In the end the proud man falls and another “who doles out riches without regret” takes his place, and it is this man, who guards himself against the influence of pride, that Beowulf should strive to become (1756). Hrothgar illustrates the process by which an especially gifted man may become proud and by his pride be damned, which is the point made in the introduction and conclusion of “The Gifts of Men.”

Just as Beowulf’s swimming prowess reflects well on the Danes, fine jewelry contributes to the glory of a ruler, a material symbol of power and influence, but the glory also redounds to the maker, since his skill is recognized and rewarded with gifts and good favor. The ruler can then, in turn, gift the piece to a thane, spreading glory to the thane and increasing the reputation of the craftsman. Gifted blacksmiths earn glory by making weapons that serve the bearer and his heirs in battle. One can see this idea at work throughout the poem. The “clever” builder’s

construction of a “high-timbered” hall showcases the power of a ruler, and the skilled hunter is able to feed the people, for example.

The overall function of “The Gifts of Men” is to encourage the creation of an ideal society in which people are both content with their station and ability and humble, the extremes of their emotions regulated by God’s distribution of gifts and by their own awareness of the dangers of negative emotions like pride and despair. Individuals are encouraged to use their gifts, as they are in the Parable of the Talents (Cross 66), and the use of such gifts contributes to the smooth functioning of society. Skills can serve as a form of social currency, as illustrated by weapon-making (58-66). Weapons are spread among various people, confer glory on both the giver and the receiver, and are necessary for the protection of the society. Because weapon-making is presented as a gift that is as worthy of recognition as bearing the weapon in battle, blacksmiths are encouraged to perform their role regardless of whether or not they receive personal glory for doing so. So, too, are hunters, builders, and sailors told that their gifts are worthy of praise, and each is essential to society because it provides food, shelter, or goods otherwise unobtainable (37-38, 44-48, 53-57).

However, though the poem finds all different gifts worthy of praise, the reader is encouraged to bear in mind that the gifts are ultimately from God. The poem begins by putting emphasis on God’s role in distributing gifts; such skills owe their origins not to man but to God. If the reader bears this in mind, it is less likely that he will “despise those more poorly endowed” (26) and fall victim to pride, even when the exercise of a gift requires competition, such as martial skills or hunting (36-43). The glory is God’s, not man’s. Additionally, because the first gift listed in the body of the poem is the “hapless hero’s” wisdom (32), he must also remember

that his opponent, though he may have lost a debate or a battle, is bound to be more skilled in another respect.

The role of God in distributing gifts also functions as an explanation of the apparent arbitrariness of easily learned skills. Some training on the part of the carpenter (45-47) or musician (49-50) is surely essential, but most of the credit is attributed to God rather than to the carpenter or musician's hard work and perseverance. Similarly, modern scientists also tend to explain exceptional talent in terms of outside influence, though this outside influence is not the influence of genetics, rather than God. An example of recent research illustrates this point.

Joanne Ruthsatz and Jourdan B. Urbach consider child prodigies, which they define as "individuals who reached professional status in a demanding field at a very young age" (419). In the introduction to their article they discuss theories that have already been proposed, including Erickson's nature-driven theory that exceptional achievement requires upwards of ten years of intense practice, and Detterman and Ruthsatz's suggestion that exceptional achievement comes from a combination of "general intelligence, domain-specific skill, and practice" (420). The latter theory is the one on which Ruthsatz and Urbach base their study. They rule out practice in the case of child prodigies under the age of ten and consider genetics as the sole contributing factor to a child's talent. The authors do not consider any other factors that might contribute to the exceptional ability of the children, such as socioeconomic status, opportunity to practice their skill based on available resources, or quality of pre-school education and enrichment. By attributing genetics only as a basis for "gifts," it seems that at least some of the scientific community shares a similar view with the poet of "Gifts of Men," but in this case genetics replace God. Genetic makeup is, like God's dispensations, something of a mystery. In neither case are gifts necessarily rewards for hard work. There are, of course, many factors to consider in

the way particular skills manifest and in the relative role played by genetics and by other influences. The point is that there is continued attempts to wrestle with this human mystery and modern scientific studies are not entirely removed from the Old English poet's exploration of the problem.

The final section of the poem includes gifts directly related to piety (lines 86-96). These final gifts, however, are not new, but rather the same gifts previously listed practiced in a different context. The final section of the poem's body shifts from an exploration of origin of gifts and returns to the question of human free will. In this section, it is the *choice* an individual makes to keep "the favor of God above all earthly goods" that is presented as a gift, in addition to skills in "churchly services" (91, 86-88). It is not the ability to choose that is presented as the gift, but the choice that *is made*, the final outcome, the decision to put God above all else. If the decision to love God is presented as a gift given by God, it becomes difficult to say that the poet of "The Gifts of Men" believes that humans have any agency at all regarding their gifts, and yet many of the spiritual gifts revisit earlier themes arising from secular gifts. One gifted individual is "bold-minded in the battle against the devil" (89), like the man "skilled in battle when shields crash together" (40). Another can "extol the Lord of life / in hymns of praise, with his pure and bright / singing voice" (92-94), much as the earlier harpist (49-50), and yet another is wise, "a teacher and scholar" (95). By equating religious and secular gifts the poet shows how any one of the diverse gifts that God grants can be put to use not only in the service of society, but also in service of God. In addition, the comparison of secular and religious gifts highlights the important role that piety plays in maintaining a functioning society. The one that "keeps his spiritual good / foremost in mind" is content as a result of his faith in God's wisdom, and such contentment allows him to perform the tasks necessary for his position, contributing to the maintenance of

societal structure (86-87). The fact that choosing to use gifts this way is in itself listed as a gift from God blurs the boundary between free will and God's will, and may be one of the "deep mysteries" that some are granted the ability to put into words and read (95-96).

Implied but not specified is the way in which temperaments play a role in certain kinds of choices. God grants gifts that seem to require cool-headedness: firmness in faith and generosity prompted by piety and morality (67-68); serving in a mead-hall (68-69), where one must keep a level head and maintain hospitality while those around him are drinking; skill with horses (69), which requires patience and a calm temperament; simple self-control and patience (70-71); and not only knowledge of the law, but the ability to calmly "deliberate judgement" (73). While there is clearly a relationship between temperament and gift, it is not clear whether the appropriate temperament must be cultivated in order to make use of the gift, or if gift and temperament are given together. The former case would allow for more human agency and match more closely Gregory the Great's interpretation of the Parable of the Talents, as it would require a decision about whether or not to use a gift by "trading it" and multiplying it, or refusing to do so and "burying it in the ground" (Matt. 25.16-18). However, if a substantial amount of work must go into making use of a gift, it is no longer a gift but rather a learned skill. Ultimately, it is unclear how much of the decision to make use of a gift can be considered free will as opposed to the result of God's actions, and the ambiguity maintains the poet's ambivalent stance on the extent to which humans have or do not have agency. In "The Gifts of Men" humans have at least some amount of free will and may be able to choose how to perceive their gifts, but it seems that their decisions are shaped by those same gifts. One can only accept or reject the gift given, learn to wield it well or fail to hone the skill, and even that decision may be more subject to a temperament which is itself given by God.

God's gifts serve as an explanation for difference in temperament and ability, allowing the poet to find reason within a seemingly incomprehensible range of abilities and personalities. Because these differences come from God, they must also be beneficial in some way. On an individual level, gifts themselves encourage appreciation for what one has, while deficiencies prevent individuals from becoming too proud. Life can then be lived with an attitude of gratitude and appreciation, rather than envy, despair, or pride, which lead to unhappiness and societal dysfunction. In addition to finding individual good in the differences between individuals, the poet of "The Gifts of Men" also finds societal good. Difference between individuals and the decision to use the gifts that one is given creates a more efficient society in which all necessary tasks, from fighting, to teaching, to building, can be performed by the people who will do them well. The poet's use of a list to name the myriad gifts that God may bestow encourages the reader to do that which he or she is suited for instead of that which will earn the most renown, as it presents all gifts as equally worthy of acknowledgement. By encouraging behaviors that lead both to individual happiness and societal efficiency, the poet of "The Gifts of Men" encourages individuals both to use their gifts and "multiply them," as encouraged in the Parable of the Talents, by extending the benefit of those gifts to the rest of society.

### Chapter Three

#### **“The Fortunes of Men” as Cautionary Tale Against Anti-Social Behaviors<sup>9</sup>**

The structure of “The Fortunes of Men” is similar to that of “The Gifts of Men.” The poem’s body is comprised of two catalogues, and each is bookended by an introduction and conclusion. However, the introduction of “Gifts of Men” is much longer than that of “The Fortunes of Men,” detailing the reasoning for the way God distributes gifts, while the introduction of “The Fortunes of Men” focuses on the beginning of life, emphasizing that the events of life and its end are unknowable for humans (8-9). By choosing to focus on what humans can know rather than discussing God’s reasoning, the poet establishes a more secular tone for “The Fortunes of Men.” The conclusion of each poem also differs in length and subject matter. While “The Gifts of Men” reiterates that God distributes gifts in a “worthy way,” “lest pride injure” men, the conclusion of “The Fortunes of Men” is half the length and briefly recognizes God as the one who “determine[d] the skills of men” and calls for the reader’s gratitude (“Gifts of Men” 110, 100, “Fortunes of Men” 94). These differences between the introduction and conclusion of each poem suggest that “The Fortunes of Men” is less focused on Christian themes than is “The Gifts of Men,” which explores them at length in its introduction and conclusion.

The catalogue portions of both poems contain lists of gifts that God grants individuals while they are alive, and each covers a similar breadth, including wisdom, craftsmanship, musicianship, and skill in battle (“Gifts of Men” 30-96, “Fortunes of Men” 64-92). “The Fortunes of Men,” however, contains an additional catalogue of deaths and misfortunes, which

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<sup>9</sup> All quotations for “The Fortunes of Men” are from the translation given by R.M. Liuzza in *Old English Poetry: An Anthology*. Though titles “The Fortunes of Men” in Liuzza’s translation, the Old English poem is also referred to by scholars as “The Fates of Men” or “The Fortunes of Mortals.”

appears before the shorter list of gifts, which is completely absent from “The Gifts of Men” (“Fortunes of Men 10-63).

Scholarship about “The Fortunes of Men” is somewhat more abundant than it is for “The Gifts of Men,” perhaps because of the fascinating if ghoulish nature of the list of misfortunes at the beginning of the poem, yet much of it deals with similar considerations, such as translation and emendation concerns and identification of sources. However, more attention is paid to the origin and meaning of the ideas contained in “The Fortunes of Men” and to the overall unity of the poem. Considerations of unity are perhaps to be expected given the fact that the poem consists of two discrete catalogues — one listing various misfortunes and deaths and another listing gifts, the latter similar to the body of “The Gifts of Men.” How scholars interpret the poem’s unity generally coincides with their opinions on whether the poem was written as a didactic Christian work originally, or whether its origins are pre-Christian and the lines that mention God and the orthodox Christian conclusion constitute later additions.

Among the scholars that consider “The Fortunes of Men” a unified Christian poem are Richard H. Dammers and Stefan Jurasinski. Dammers analyzes the metrical variations in the poem to establish its unity. As part of his argument for a unified poem, Dammers interprets the Christian conclusion as the most important section, saying “The second and third sections, descriptions apparently pagan in nature depicting the whims of Fate, are subordinate to the fourth section’s primary Christian theme, the absolute power of God as ruler of Fate” (462). The apparently discrete death catalogue and gifts catalogue, for Dammers, can be easily understood as an example of a typical call for repentance of sins in the face of human mortality (465). It is this call for repentance through an emphasis on death, known as the soul-and-body tradition, that Jurasinski argues primarily proves the unity of “Fortunes of Men.” He argues that any apparently

pre-Christian elements are a part of the formula for writing Old English poetry, and that rather than being an example of gnomic wisdom literature, “The Fortunes of Men” is more akin to “the myriad of Old and Early Middle English poems that invoked the fragility of the body to move their audiences towards acts of piety” (356). The particular horror that leads to piety in the audience is not brought about merely by descriptions of death, but of deaths in which the body cannot be given the all-important burial rites, either because it is consumed or because the death was a result of suicide (354).

Karen Swenson, Robert DiNapoli, and Lindy Brady argue on the other hand that the “The Fortunes of Men” is not a single unified poem, but likely a mixture of pre-Christian fragments with later Christian additions. Karen Swenson, whose view Jurasinski argues explicitly against, interprets the description of deaths not as a part of the soul-and-body tradition, but as descriptions of various pre-Christian rituals. She argues that the poem is composed from multiple fragments resulting from the interaction between the Germanic pre-Christian culture and the later Christian culture and provides a rough timeline of the order in which she believes the sections came together (126-127). Scholars on both sides of the “unity” debate can be found that disagree with the idea that the death catalogue represents pre-Christian rituals, including DiNapoli, who believes that the particulars of the rituals “would in all likelihood be lost to an Anglo-Saxon poet,” meaning that none of the deaths would have been understood as pagan rituals at least by the time “The Fortunes of Men” was included in the *Exeter Book*. Though Jurasinski and DiNapoli provide sound arguments against interpreting the death catalogue as ritual descriptions and Lindy Brady provides a fascinating alternative interpretation, Swenson’s analysis of the poem as a dialogue between pre-Christian and Christian themes and interpretations seems to

aptly explain the way the Christian elements seem grafted on, rather than incorporated throughout, although consensus on this point remains elusive (134).

Brady's argument assumes the disunity between two halves of the poem, treating "each as worthy of study in its own right," but focuses her interpretation on the death catalogue (326). She considers the location of the deaths and notes that all deaths described are notably marked by either expulsion from society or danger that comes from within society itself. Though the poem attempts to show a worldview in which humans are helpless against the forces of nature, if each death is analyzed more closely, each is impossible without expulsion or isolation from society. According to Brady, the deaths "come so directly as a result of human action that it is difficult to assign blame anywhere else. The poem's first half thus portrays a world in which men do wield ultimate influence over the fates of others" (335). By building on the idea that all the deaths are ultimately caused by humans, it is possible to see the relationship between humans and society that the poem expresses. Individuals are not presented as at odds with society in all cases, but rather it is when one behaves in an antisocial way that other humans become a danger rather than a source of safety. "The Fortunes of Men" thus shows the worldly danger associated with acting against the interests of the society.

The introduction of "Fortunes of Men" mentions God but briefly, focusing on the birth and growth of a child from a secular, rather than from a religious, perspective. The poet says only that it is "by the grace of God" that men and women have children and that "God alone knows / what the years will hold for [the child] as he grows" (1-3, 8-9). God's motives for allowing children to be born are not explored, as are His motives for distributing gifts in "The Gifts of Men." It is, however, acknowledged that He allows children to come into the world, echoing the Christian belief that nothing can happen without God's will, expressed when Jesus

tells the disciples “Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? And not one of them shall fall on the ground without your father. . . Fear not therefore: better are you than many sparrows” (Matt. 10.29-31). That “God alone knows” what will become of the newborn child as it progresses through life also shows a belief in God’s omniscience, yet the references to God in the introduction do not result in the expression of an explicitly Christian worldview. As Robert DiNapoli notes, “the fact that birth and death alike take place in the fuller context of God’s active and permissive will is pushed into the background, as the poet here regards the twin mysteries of our emergence into this world and our departure from it in intimately human terms” (131). God’s role in the birth and growth of a child in “The Fortunes of Men” is more akin to the role of fate, in which a child is destined to be born and destined for certain events, but his future is unknowable for the human parents, whose roles in “cloth[ing],” “nurtur[ing],” and “teach[ing]” him are emphasized (lines 3-4). God is then presented in the introduction as a way for the reader to assign higher meaning to seemingly random events of birth and death, providing an admittedly mysterious purpose for the events that the poet is about to recount in the next section.

The following section of the poem is a catalogue of deaths, including by hungry wolf (10-14), by starvation and natural disaster (15), in war (16), by accident (21-26), by hanging (33-43), or in a drunken brawl (48-57). God is mentioned only twice in this section, a tactic which distances Him from association with misfortune. The lame man “must groan at his fate / mourn the Maker’s decrees with a troubled mind” (19-20), which does acknowledge God’s role in shaping the physical form of man, and “the Maker’s decrees” suggests that the deformity is by design. God again seems to function similarly to fate, though, providing humans with something other than random happenstance to point to as the cause of their distress. In the Christian context that “The Fortunes of Men” has taken on through presumed interpolations, it is the decrees of an

incomprehensible God that causes things to happen, rather than an equally incomprehensible idea of fate. However, by mentioning God instead of fate, even briefly, the poet also includes the underlying assumption that God is ultimately benevolent. This may comfort the reader but does not seem to be a comfort to the lame man, who “must” be miserable, mourning his fate as a matter of course (19-20). The idea of misfortune coming from a benevolent God apparently does nothing to comfort the afflicted, implying that the hope in an improved lot after death is not always enough to counterbalance a life of suffering.<sup>10</sup> Though the Norse are stereotypically considered the more brutal culture due to popular media fascination with Vikings, this line in “The Fortunes of Men” is at odds with both the kind of hope in “The Gifts of Men,” which relies on the presence of other gifts to balance out deficiencies, and with the kind of hope in *Hávamál*, which emphasizes the deeds that can still be done despite disabilities in lines such as “The lame ride horseback, the handless drive herds, / the deaf may be dauntless in battle” (*Hávamál* pp. 20).

The second mention of God in the death catalogue is the first that shows God as an active force, rather than one that allows events, knows about events, or brings events about without intention in the same manner as does fate. It is “with God’s power” that a man “will put an end / to all his hardships while he is still young, / and be blessed with success again in later years.” Here God’s position is in no way interchangeable with fate (58-60). By saying that it is by God’s power that a young man can end his hardships, rather than by His grace or his decree, the poet creates an image of God as one who is working to change something already in motion, in this case the “hardships” that the man faced when he was younger. The active participation of God in

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<sup>10</sup> If we accept the theory that “The Fortunes of Men” is comprised of pre-Christian fragments and later Christian additions and emendations, as Swenson suggests, an additional interpretation of the lame man’s misery is possible. If the original pre-Christian sentiment was in fact a mourning of the decree of fate, rather than God, there would have been no implication of a benevolent force that allows misfortune, and thus nothing that might comfort the lame man.

Earthly events is linked with a positive outcome for the man in question, while the man himself serves as a way for God to exercise power benevolently.

It is with the beneficial nature of God's involvement in mind that the poet begins the catalogue of gifts that "the Lord Almighty allots to all men" (64). Although somewhat shorter than the catalogue in "The Gifts of Men," the gifts are much the same, with the exception of gifts of piety, which are entirely absent in "The Fortunes of Men." The gifts included relate to sports, martial pursuits, musicianship, crafts, boardgames, drinking, and animal-taming. In this catalogue God does not function the same way fate does, as in much of the death catalogue, but rather God "controls [the] destinies" of individuals, functioning as an entirely separate entity (66). It is God's orthodox Christian function as ruler, rather than his merger with fate from the introduction and death catalogue, that is linked with the myriad gifts one can receive while on earth.

Though God's role becomes more orthodox in the gifts catalogue and He is praised in the brief conclusion, DiNapoli notes that "despite its occasional statements of Christian belief and sensibility, the poem as a whole appears remarkably to defer or evade the moralizing attitude toward death that was second nature to most medieval authors" (131). The transition from a catalogue of deaths to one of gifts, notably void of any moralizing, does not match either Jurasinski's suggestion that the intended effect is to "move the audience towards acts of piety," or Dammers' belief that the poem can be linked with the Church's encouragement for "a repenting sinner to meditate upon a physical representation of mankind's mortality as penance" (Jurasinski 356, Dammers 465). Taking into account the transition from treating God as essentially the same as fate to one who directs and, in some cases, alters fate, it seems more likely that the catalogue of gifts serves to counterbalance the catalogue of deaths and

misfortunes. It encourages hope and appreciation for God's gifts in the same way "The Gifts of Men" does by telling the reader that "No one in the world is so woebegone. . . that the giver of gifts would completely deny him" at least one gift (8-11). But rather than the giving of gifts serving to prevent "despair in whatever works / he might bring about in this worldly life, / or in every gift," the motivation for God to bestow gifts in "The Fortunes of Men" is to prevent despair resulting from thoughts of death (14-16). It does not need to make equal calls for humility and hope, because it begins with one of the most humbling realizations possible for a living creature: the inevitability of death. God gives gifts, then, to prevent despair in the face of bodily destruction. "Fortunes of Men" is thus a fundamentally secular piece of wisdom literature, despite its inclusion of religious themes, and its rooting in the worldly is made more obvious from the fact that the gifts are related only to life and have nothing to do with the Christian afterlife. Even gifts related to piety, which would help an individual attain such an afterlife, are conspicuously absent.

It is not strange for "Gifts of Men" to focus so much on worldly gifts, since it assumes that the motivation for dispensing such gifts is prevention of human pride or despair provoked by unequal distribution of gifts. Interpretation of God's worldly gifts as a means of giving humans hope in the face of *death* in "The Fortunes of Men" is peculiar though, since Christ's sacrifice is, in Christian theology, the ultimate source of hope when considering the end of worldly life. This poet is offering hope during life, not for after death. And indeed, the mercy that the poet encourages the reader to thank and praise God for at the end is not the mercy of forgiveness, but the mercy of making life enjoyable despite how it might end (93-98).

Though the primary wisdom presented in "The Fortunes of Men" is to appreciate the gifts one has during life as opposed to dwelling on misfortune and death, the poet also explores the

impact of the individual on society and vice-versa. Lindy Brady's "Death and the Landscape of *The Fortunes of Men*" is particularly helpful for this consideration. Brady notes that beneath the "outwardly simple scenes of a threatening natural landscape. . . stands the culpability of the human society which is fundamentally accountable for these deaths, all of which occur in isolation and therefore could only have been brought about by expulsion from civilization into an unforgiving landscape" (326). Each death either results from a lack of society's protection (e.g. being devoured by a wolf) or from active antagonism from other humans (e.g. death in battle) (lines 12-13, 16). Despite human responsibility for death and misfortune, however, society is not a purely antagonistic force in the poem. Society also protects the individual from threats from the natural world and from other humans, and Brady argues that the parents in the introduction serve as a "microcosm of the benefits gained by belonging to a community: food, clothing, companionship, emotional support, knowledge, and direction" (328).

If it is the case that society is both shown as a positive force in the lives of individuals as well as a force that is ultimately responsible for the deaths listed in the catalogue, it is necessary to consider the circumstances in which society shifts from protector to antagonist, a question that Brady does not explore in detail. Her conclusion states that the death catalogue "portrays a world in which men do wield ultimate influence over the fates of *others*, yet it seems an even bleaker state of affairs than events beyond men's control" (335, emphasis added). While it is undoubtedly true that men do have partial control over the fates of others in "The Fortunes of Men," individuals are also shown to have some control over their own fates. Society does not arbitrarily reject or attack individuals, but rather acts against those who have failed to live up to societal expectations. Two explicit examples of death coming to those who have acted in anti-social ways are present in the death catalogue. The first is the man who "must wander in ways

remote, / forced, foot-sore, his provisions in a pack, / to tread a damp trail in dangerous territories / and foreign lands” (lines 27-30). The individual is undoubtedly in exile, a severe repercussion that one might face for lawbreaking, as exile from the protection of society could easily become a death sentence. No one would be exiled without cause, but only as the result of anti-social behavior. The “wine-drunk brawler” who dies by “the edge of a blade on the mead-bench” is also turned upon by society as a result of his transgression — in this case irresponsibly drinking and fighting (48-50).

While the overall function of “The Fortunes of Men” seems to be to show the gifts of life as worldly compensation for the pain of death, the first half of the poem also warns against anti-social behavior, that will lead to death and prevent enjoyment of worldly gifts. Though similar to “The Gifts of Men” in that it aims to build and maintain a functioning society, it does so not by encouraging individuals to be content with their lot in life, but by showing what harm may befall them if they are not. As such, “The Fortunes of Men” is the more secular of the two texts, arguing for behaviors that will allow for the efficient functioning of society using reasoning based on misfortune and death, which the living are intimately familiar with, rather than using theological arguments. Despite its inclusion in the *Exeter Book*, the use of secular reasoning to encourage pro-social behavior encourages comparison of “The Fortunes of Men” with Old Norse poetry such as *Hávamál*, which shows much less Christian influence. Examination of *Hávamál* in the next chapter in terms of gifts reveals surprising similarities to both “The Fortunes of Men” and “The Gifts of Men.”

## Chapter Four

### Creating a Better Society in the Old Norse/Icelandic *Hávamál*

The previous two chapters considered how two Old English poems, “The Gifts of Men” and “The Fortunes of Men,” address individual talents or gifts and the role of such talents and gifts in constructing a functioning society as well as the relative role of the individual and the divine in these matters. To consider how, in their wisdom literature, the Old Norse deal with the creation of a functional society through individual contributions, I return to the Old Norse/Icelandic Eddic poem *Hávamál*. *Hávamál* does not list gifts as do the Old English poems; instead, it is concerned with dispensing advice on how to be happy and socially valuable. Though the poet suggests that some people are “gifted,” or naturally better at certain things than others, he also assumes that practice is necessary for skills to be developed — something for which individuals must be responsible. In *Hávamál* no deity grants gifts or defines a limit for the number of gifts any one person can be granted. Individuals are thus as likely to gain skills through hard work as through natural predisposition, and they can, and are even encouraged to develop a multitude of skills. How successful this development is helps to determine how productive an individual will be as a member of society. It is the use of individual skills and talents, the poet suggests, that helps society to successfully function.

As discussed previously, the deeds done during life are vitally important to building a reputation that will live beyond an individual’s death. What has not yet been addressed is what specific deeds lead to such a reputation. The gifts listed in “The Gifts of Men” and “The Fortunes of Men” together with the acquired skills that are considered important in *Hávamál* serve as a guide to the building of a good reputation. It is by being a good community-member, one who uses acquired skills in the service of society rather than for personal gain, that an individual is,

through reputation, able to live on after death. In its emphasis on proper use of talents to achieve the kind of reputation that makes for a memorable afterlife, *Hávamál* is similar to “The Gifts of Men,” although the latter has a strong religious foundation lacking in *Hávamál*. In the Old Norse poem’s emphasis on the worldly, however, it is similar to “The Fortunes of Men.” In *Hávamál* elements of both Old English poems are implicitly combined in a more secular guide to obtaining an afterlife in which an individual’s reputation remains present in the minds of subsequent generations of the living. The broad categories for skills included in *Hávamál* include wisdom and the ability to form friendships, but foundational to these are attributes such as moderation, worldliness, bravery, and generosity.

Wisdom is an individually and collectively valuable skill which can be gained by fostering moderation and worldliness. *Hávamál*’s praise of wisdom overlaps with the gifts listed in “The Gifts of Men” and “The Fortunes of Men.” In “The Gifts of Men” it is said:

To some here on earth [God] lends possessions,  
Wealth in the world. One is unfortunate,  
A hapless hero, and yet he is wise  
In the mind’s skills... (30-33)

It is implied that wisdom is given by God, since other gifts are lacking. Likewise, one of the gifts given by God in “The Fortunes of Men” is that “one becomes a wise scholar” (71-72). In both cases, wisdom is valuable, as it is in *Hávamál*. The Old Norse poet asserts:

Lucky the man who can look to himself  
to provide his praise and wisdom;  
evil counsel has often come  
out of another man’s mind. (9)

and:

If a man takes with him a mind full of sense  
he can carry nothing better;  
riches like this on a stranger’s road

will do more good than gold. (10)

One who is able to trust in his own wisdom rather than requiring the counsel of others is “lucky.” Similarly, there is “nothing better” than “a mind full of sense,” as sense “will do more good than gold” (10). Implied in the first stanza is that wisdom is not equally distributed. Some men provide “evil counsel” and thus, having the sense to know what is wise is a valuable skill. A later stanza emphasizes that wisdom is not by any means a common trait:

There are little shores and little seas  
And men with little sense;  
All are not equal in wisdom—  
No lacking of those lacking wit. (53)

The comparison of the natural world, the “little shores and little seas,” to men who are similarly “little” emphasizes that “all are not equal in wisdom.” This is a cynical acknowledgement that many can be found “lacking wit.” But the poet does not stop with the rather obvious idea that some are wise and some aren’t. Other verses lay out a sort of program for acquiring or honing wisdom and for avoiding behaviors that interfere with mental acuity, advice not, interestingly, provided for how to be brave. Wisdom, it seems, can be cultivated; courage cannot. Behaviors to avoid are the excessive; moderation is praised as a means of exercising wisdom.

Practical advice includes moderation in drinking and speaking. For example:

If a man takes with him a mind full of sense  
he can carry nothing better;  
nothing is worse to carry on your way  
than a head heavy with beer. (11)

Drunkenness is incompatible with wisdom, driving sense from the mind. The poet seems to recognize and describe a common human behavior taken to excess, and suggests a way that

people can instead cultivate more moderate, beneficial behaviors. Similarly, avoidance of excessive speech is advised:

A man who speaks and is never silent  
Is bound to blunder;  
A ready tongue, if it's not restrained,  
Will do you damage. (29)

One must not speak too much, lest he says something that angers the listener or shares information that is potentially harmful or cruel, but one must not be silent either. The reader is told:

A man will ask and answer questions  
if he wants to be called wise;  
One man can know something but two should not,  
The whole world knows if three do. (63)

The important role of both learning from and teaching others in cultivating wisdom is implied since one must both “ask and answer questions / if he wants to be called wise” (63). However, despite the importance of communication, giving too much information holds the same dangers as if one “is never silent” (29). The concluding lines “one man can know something but two should not, / the whole world knows if three do” clearly highlight the dangers of gossip and call for discretion in speaking (63). Thus, it is moderation that is key to communicating wisely. An individual must both listen and learn from others to increase knowledge, and in turn spread what he or she has learned. *Hávamál* advises the reader to ask questions, listen, and learn from others, in addition to offering advice as a situation demands.

The importance of gaining insight from others extends to experience with other cultures. The poet tells us that it is necessary to travel in order to gain knowledge, as the following stanza illustrates:

A man must go to many places,

Travel widely in the world,  
Before his is wise enough to see the workings  
Of other men's minds. (18)

The importance of broadening one's horizons and experiencing foreign cultures is a remarkably "modern" idea. By traveling "widely in the world" one gains cultural knowledge beyond what can be experienced within one's environment. Broadening cultural exposure allows one to "see the workings / of other men's minds," suggesting a surprisingly catholic awareness that other cultures have value and implying that to be wise one must be open-minded and avoid insularity. Cultural awareness and a respect for general "otherness" can also aid in building and maintaining vital social relationships. Respect for differences makes it easier for individuals to form relationships with a variety of peoples, ensuring that when one does travel, one has a good chance of making friendships that will make survival easier. It can also lead to greater respect for those within one's own culture (respect of a warrior for a farmer, for example), which may lead to greater social cohesion. Wisdom is, thus, a complex "skill" that helps individuals forge positive relationships with others, crucial to community survival, to shaping a strong society, and to solid relationships inside and outside one's own culture.

Wisdom, in addition to bravery and generosity, aids in the acquisition of friendship. In a number of stanzas *Hávamál* addresses the relationship between social cohesion and positive human relationships. Combined in a series of four consecutive stanzas (47-50), for example, is an expression of the ways in which friendship is forged and the ways in which it exercises social value.

Always as a young man I traveled alone,  
And I would lose my way;  
I felt rich if I made a friend—  
No man by himself is happy.

Men brave and generous live the best lives,  
Seldom will they sorrow;  
Then there are fools, afraid of everything,  
Who grumble instead of giving.

When I saw two scarecrows in a field  
I covered them with my clothes;  
They looked like warriors when they were dressed—  
Who hails a naked hero?

The pine tree withers in an open place,  
Neither bark nor needles save it.  
How shall a man hated by everyone  
Live for very long? (47-50)

The fact that these stanzas occur consecutively suggests that the scribe of the version of *Hávamál* preserved in the Codex Regius believed them to be thematically linked. The stanzas move from literal to figurative, reinforcing an individual's need for society and the need for generosity in the formation of social bonds. The poet begins with the fact that when "young" he traveled alone, but highlights the importance of companionship by equating it to a form of wealth. He "lost his way" but when he made a friend he understood it to be a form of "wealth," suggesting that young men must learn that "friends" are necessary to happiness. He then lauds the attributes both of bravery and, significantly, of generosity (48). Both generosity and bravery contribute to friendships and thus to happy, healthy lives: those that give freely to others, whether it be in the form of time, money, shelter, or support in battle, are likely to find their gifts reciprocated as feelings of friendship and loyalty grow. Stinginess, on the other hand, is linked to fear which prevents a man from supporting others. Stinginess is likely to be met with reluctance to invest resources in the miserly individual, leading to isolation and a greater risk from the elements and from outsiders due to a lack of social support.

The importance of generosity is carried on into the next stanza. In it the speaker clothes two scarecrows (49). The generosity of this individual is understood from the previous stanzas as worthy of praise. This instance implies societal interdependence that is also found in “The Gifts of Men.” Just as the blacksmith uses his resources to provide weapons and shields for fighters, and by so doing bolsters his own reputation, the generosity of the man who clothes the scarecrows is essential to their transformation into “heroes,” creating warriors of those who otherwise would not be (61-60). This practice of generosity improves his reputation and makes beneficial future friendships more likely. The stanza serves as a reminder that even “heroes” are dependent on those around them for support, without which they are no better than scarecrows — a threatening presence when viewed at a distance, but unable to protect that which they guard except by illusion.

The stanza that follows metaphorically extends the emphasis on an individual’s need for society by drawing the comparison between a man “hated by everyone” and a pine tree that “withers in an open place” (50). Without protection from the elements, the pine tree will suffer. So, too will the man who is without friends. One must cultivate relationships by being open, brave, and generous, rather than cowardly, miserly, and isolated. One must understand the value of friendship. Fear, isolation, and stinginess prevents the development of healthy relationships. The image of the lone pine tree, when understood as a metaphor for an individual exiled from society, has the same effect as the catalogue of misfortunes in “The Fortunes of Men,” which includes the obvious exile who “must wander in ways remote, / forced, foot-sore, his provisions in a pack” (27-28). Both remind the reader that a healthy society composed of interdependent relationships is necessary for survival. Positive relationships and companionship between

individuals ensure individual happiness and create a more stable social structure, one in which individuals are likely to care for and protect one another.

Bravery, too, seems to play a role in building and maintaining positive social relationships. As in “The Gifts of Men” and “The Fortunes of Men,” *Hávamál* values bravery as an attribute linked to reputation and the survival of both the individual and society. It is “men brave and generous” that will “live the best lives,” and a king’s son should be “bold in battle,” but *Hávamál* does not advise how to be brave, as it does for generosity (48, 15). Bravery is vital to the survival of society but it is not clear in the poem that one can cultivate or practice bravery. The brave ensure the safety of the community in the face of rivals that may try to take resources such as land and food for themselves. Brave men and women may protect the smaller community of family from other individuals that would do them harm and from threats from wild animals. Bravery allows individuals to sacrifice resources for others in a show of generosity, while the link between friendship and wealth suggests that giving up material resources for the sake of securing friendships should be viewed as a kind of investment. Fear of loss of goods or life and a failure to understand the value of friendships for survival and happiness, on the other hand, leads to stinginess. Bravery is thus vital if an individual is to become a better person, whose reputation can live after death.

While these stanzas make clear the importance of friendship as a practice of generosity and courage in society, in others the reader can learn how to obtain and maintain friendships. The advice is reminiscent of a modern guide to social etiquette. Generosity, presented as a gift in the Old English poem “The Gifts of Men,” plays a large part in the maintenance of relationships, as evidenced by the lines “frequent giving makes friendships last, / if the exchange is equal” (41). Following the prescribed social rules, such as eating before visiting friends so as to not “sit

around glumly acting starved,” as well as visiting often, but knowing “when it’s time to leave” are also vital to maintaining the positive relationships necessary for survival (33-35).

It is easier to form friendships and develop wisdom if one’s basic needs are met. *Hávamál* makes clear the importance of self-sufficiency, health, and at least some physical comforts. It is further suggested that such basic needs make it easier to exercise generosity. Comfort and good health are “gifts” but not in the sense of divine bestowal, as they are in the Old English poems. The verses that deal with these “gifts” suggest they are beneficial, but according to *Hávamál*, people can help themselves to achieve greater comfort or at least improve their situations. It seems that physical comforts matter and that they make building good character, friendships, generosity, and wisdom easier to do:

For human beings the best things are fire,  
And the sight of the sun,  
And to be granted good health  
and to live a blameless life (68).

The poet does not instruct readers how to obtain such comforts or to achieve or maintain good health. What the poet advises instead is how to adjust if one lacks for these. Bravery acts as a foundation for that adjustment. By facing hardships and poor health with the same bravery with which one faces an enemy, individuals can overcome their hardships. The reader is told that other comforts can make up for the lack of health, such as the ability to “rejoice in [one’s] sons. . . [one’s] friends or sufficient money” or “work well done” (69). Family, material comfort, or even the pride that one can take in hard work can make up for poor health. Lack of comforts may be made up for by self-sufficiency, which is itself presented as yet another laudable attribute. The poet assumes that self-sufficiency is an attitude toward life one should cultivate:

Though it be little, better to live  
In a house you hold as your own;  
With just two goats, thin thatch for your roof,  
You're better off than begging.

Though it be little, better to live  
In a house you hold as your own;  
A man's heart breaks if he has to beg  
For everything he eats. (36-37)

Thus, even minimal self-sufficiency is better than dependency. These stanzas also encourage the reader to appreciate whatever he or she has, regardless of how little it may be. However, the poet does not expect the reader to remain content with hardship. Another section says “one man is wealthy, another is in want— / has that one no cause for complaint?” (78). While one is encouraged to appreciate independence regardless of how meager his circumstances, no one is expected to be “in want” without legitimate complaint. This notion, when coupled with the poet's encouragements to be generous, seems remarkably socialist in nature,<sup>11</sup> and is in stark contrast to the contentment with even meager gifts encouraged in both “The Gifts of Men,” and “The Fortunes of Men,” in which one should be thankful for any gift that can make life before death more enjoyable. *Hávamál* encourages individuals to take responsibility both for cultivating essential social and economic skills, and for generously ensuring that one's less fortunate fellows are adequately provided for, as exemplified by the one who clothes scarecrows.

The poet's advice on becoming a good person and a productive member of society results in a guide to achieving a good reputation. This reputation is crucial to the poet's understanding of an afterlife, which relies on the memories that others have of the dead individual, rather than

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<sup>11</sup> In the sense of “a pre-capitalist state of society in which things are held or used in common.” “Socialism,” *OED*, def. 3

the continuity of the dead individual's soul, as in Christianity. A good reputation is the implied reward for the combination of positive attributes discussed previously. "To live a blameless life," is one of the "best things" for humans (68). It is also said:

Happy is the man who hears of himself  
Well-meant words of praise;  
It's hard to know what may be hidden  
In another man's mind. (8)

One cannot really know what another thinks. But the attributes and behaviors that will result in a good reputation are wisdom, obtained through moderation; friendship, gained through generosity; and self-sufficiency, which requires bravery in the face of hardships and poor health. One should strive for healthy social connections, wisdom and friendships. One should bravely strive for self-sufficiency in the face of hardships in order to cultivate good health and basic comforts that make life bearable and allow the practice of generosity. The only vital attribute that the reader is not told how to gain, and the lack of which cannot be made up, is bravery, which is foundational to overcoming the hardships encountered in life and to protecting both individuals and the community. Consequently, it is impossible to imagine a coward with a good reputation.

At this point we should recall the importance of reputation in the concept of the afterlife shown in *Hávamál*. The afterlife is not a continuation of an individual's soul into either heaven or hell, as it is in Christian theology. The only life after death alluded to in *Hávamál* is that of an individual's memory continuing on in the minds of the living. It is therefore necessary to live memorably enough, that is, to have a good enough reputation, that the memory of one's life does not disappear after death. The attributes described in *Hávamál* are the key to obtaining a good reputation, and thus, to achieving life after death in the form of others' recollections.

## Conclusion

Because of the overt link between reputation and the concept of the afterlife in *Hávamál*, the Old Norse poem shares a surprising similarity with “The Gifts of Men.” In lines 86 – 96, the poet of “The Gifts of Men” describes gifts being used for religious purposes, such as using bravery in “battle against the devil” or using a “pure and bright / singing voice” to extol God with “hymns of praise” (89, 92-93). For the “Gifts of Men” poet, using gifts for Christian worship will help ensure that an individual will go to heaven and have an ideal afterlife. So, too, does the poet of the Old English “Maxims I” urge the reader to “maintain. . . righteousness” as a means of “tak[ing] steps with regard to his severance from the world” (“Maxims I,” 344, 346). The focus in both cases is using life to prepare for an ideal afterlife: the Christian heaven in the case of the Old English poems. Similarly, for the poet of *Hávamál*, who is not interested in gifts per se, developing positive attributes will help ensure a good reputation, and thus an ideal afterlife in the memories of one’s friends and progeny. The largest difference between *Hávamál* and “The Gifts of Men” is that *Hávamál* serves as a guide to living day-to-day. “The Gifts of Men” discusses the divine logic behind the distribution of gifts, with the understanding that an afterlife in heaven is the ultimate goal. *Hávamál* focuses on how to behave during life to earn the best reputation possible and ensure that one is remembered by those who live after.

In its focus on life, *Hávamál* is more similar to “The Fortunes of Men” than to “The Gifts of Men” or “Maxims I.” While “The Fortunes of Men” is a Christian poem in its current form, the poet does not encourage the reader to contemplate death in order to prepare for the afterlife, as does the poet of “Maxims I.” Death is rather to be contemplated in order to recognize the great benefit of living within the safety of society. “The Fortunes of Men” also does not draw biblical conclusions about the gifts one has during life. Gifts enjoyed during life are instead juxtaposed

with misfortunes and deaths, and function both to suggest that life is worthwhile and to encourage pro-social behaviors that will allow an individual to live longer. The understanding of gifts in “The Fortunes of Men,” then, is grounded in the worldly in much the same way as it is in *Hávamál*, though the latter is focused on learned skills rather than gifts, per se.

The differences observed in *Hávamál* may in part be the result of the fact that the “gifts” it contains are much more directly related to survival and social function. Wisdom keeps an individual from giving out improper information and encourages discretion; society and friendship, as we have seen in “The Fortunes of Men,” can be valuable protections against the dangers of the natural world. Bravery allows people to bear hardship with courage and to protect themselves, their goods, and their families, while health, self-sufficiency, and a degree of comfort allow them to be productive members of society with the skills to defend that society, produce essential food and goods, and exercise generosity.

Another explanation of the difference between *Hávamál* and “The Gifts of Men” is *Hávamál*'s lack of Christian influence, which has been explored in contrast to “Maxims I.” The entire book of Job, in which Job is tested with every manner of hardship and chooses to remain faithful to God rather than becoming discontent, is intended to teach the reader to bear suffering with gratitude to God rather than complaint. Faith is what matters. While the reader of *Hávamál* is also encouraged to be thankful for what he or she has, contentment is not a virtue that will help an individual in life or improve a society. Rather, some degree of discontent can spur the unfortunate person to change his or her behavior in order to improve his or her situation and thus the situation of his social group.

Both Old English texts, “The Gifts of Men” and “The Fortunes of Men,” list similar categories of gifts from God. These include gifts of wealth, wisdom, strength and bravery, as

well as competitive, craft-making and metalsmithing skills. While these gifts are explicitly given by God in the Old English texts, the Old Norse *Hávamál* does not assume individuals “receive” gifts from a divine source, but rather implies that these are learned skills. There is, of course, some overlap between the Old English and Old Norse poems, particularly in terms of their emphasis on wisdom and bravery. Neither assumes that humans are all equal; both acknowledge that some may have natural skills resembling gifts; but the Old English poems focus on how to make the best use of the skills one is given and attempt to explain the reasons for skills and abilities one may or may not have. Unlike the Old English texts, *Hávamál* does not include any obvious Christian theology. No God is present in *Hávamál* to ensure that gifts are distributed equitably or to temper the human emotions of pride and despair. Humans themselves must accept responsibility for cultivating skills and for creating a society in which all can live in relative safety and prosperity. Rather than a productive society being the result of God’s work, it must be the result of the work of humans. It is understood that people vary widely in whether they are mostly good or bad, and in their personalities, skills, and talents, but *Hávamál* makes no attempt to explain this variation. It is striving to be better that matters for one’s own life and happiness, as well as for the health and continuity of the society. Perhaps paradoxically, the worldview of *Hávamál* is more hopeful because it accounts more readily for change caused by human effort, as well as being more realistic in acknowledging that humans themselves are responsible for their interactions with others.

The absence of Christian themes may also explain the emphasis on learned skills, rather than gifts, in *Hávamál*. The poets of “The Fortunes of Men” and “The Gifts of Men” explicitly claim that gifts are given by God, but in *Hávamál*, there is no Christian God to bestow gifts. What remains is the result of a combination of unexplained natural ability and hard work, and for

every stanza that presents a positive attribute as natural, without explanation, there is at least one more that advises the reader how to develop the same gift. The poet of *Hávamál* does not show the same interest in what we would term genetic differences, but instead is concerned with how these differences are deployed for the common good. “The Gifts of Men” is concerned with why people are different and with preventing jealousy, pride, and despair from growing out of such differences, with faith in the God who has arranged everything for the benefit of humans as the ultimate solution. “The Fortunes of Men,” on the other hand, is concerned with the individual’s role in avoiding behaviors that lead to exile, but does not give explicit advice on how to behave to become a socially productive and valuable person, as does *Hávamál*, even though that advice is implied. The treatment of gifts or positive attributes in terms of their benefit to society, though, is similar in both the Old English poems and in *Hávamál*. In all cases, individuals are driven by the awareness that death is inevitable and that the promise of a good afterlife depends on the use of gifts in ways that help create and maintain a functioning society.

It is established in “Maxims” that individuals should always keep death in their minds to ensure they are taking the proper steps to meet it, and the theme of life as preparation for death continues in each of the poems. In “The Gifts of Men” this is done by discouraging the extreme emotions of pride and despair through the acknowledgement that “each person / among the people” has at least one gift, but no one has them all (6-7). Everyone is to be content with the gifts they have and to make use of them within the fabric of the social structure because it is God’s will, and acting in accordance with God’s will ensures heavenly reward. In “The Fortunes of Men” gifts act both as the counterbalance for fear of and despair in the face of death, but also as a means by which people can be taught to behave in pro-social ways that ensure their protection within society.

The major differences lie in the methods the poets use to encourage the readers to use their gifts in a pro-social manner, whether it be through contrast with unpleasant deaths, theological reasoning, or the ability to live well enough to be remembered after death. In the same way that Gregory the Great's *Pastoral Care* encourages prelates to teach the same lessons using reasoning best suited to their audiences, each of the poets encourages the reader to use his or her gifts in ways that help society function by using reasoning that they believed would be best suited for their audience (Short 500-501). The differences between the Old Norse/Icelandic and Old English poems reveal different views of death and of the afterlife; of the origin and use of individual skills and talents; of human agency; and of the place and purpose of the individual in society. While they may be read in many ways, one purpose of all these poems, Old English and Old Norse/Icelandic alike, is to help individuals understand "gifts" and to provide advice on their place in a functional and effective society.

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