

Hi! I'm Professor Moira Fitzgibbons from Marist College in Poughkeepsie, New York. And I teach courses in medieval literature, in gender studies, in disability studies, in the graphic narrative, and the History of the English Language. Most of my research deals with later medieval literature, but I also really love Old English poetry. And so today, I thought we could talk about "The Seafarer."

Here's a plan for this video in case you just want to skip around. Until about minute 8 or so, I'm going to read an excerpt in Old English and just sort of discuss its linguistic and cultural context. Then, for maybe like the next 4 minutes, I'll discuss ideas and themes operative in the poem, especially what we might call the "selfiness" working in it. The third part will deal with the whole way that modern-day poets have responded to the poem and adapted it and also other works that we might read alongside "The Seafarer." Then the formal part of the video will end--but I will append a small discussion of some linguistic features in Old English that are shown in the poem that I think are kind of cool. But those are really for word nerds only, so if that isn't you, then just steer clear of that part, to use a navigational metaphor.

OK; so. Throughout the video, I'm going to use this website and this edition of "The Seafarer" produced by Dr. Siân Echard of the University of British Columbia. Dr. Echard has kindly given me permission to use this, which I really appreciate. And what you can see is that the Old English is on the left, and the modern English translation is on the right. So, without further ado, I'm going to read the first 26 lines of the poem in Old English. While I do, you might want to listen for alliteration, because that's a crucial poetic strategy in Old English. Also, just so you know, if it looks like a *p* with a tall sort of line, or a crooked *d* with a line through it, in Old English those both stand in for *th*.

OK; so.

Mæg ic be me sylfum soðgied wrecan,
siþas secgan, hu ic geswincdagum
earfoðhwile oft þrowade,
bitre breostceare gebiden hæbbe, gecunnad in ceole cearselda fela,
atol yþa gewealc, þær mec oft bigeat
nearo nihtwaco æt nacan stefnan,
þonne he be clifum cnossað. Calde geþrunge
wæron mine fet, forste gebunden,
caldum clommum, þær þa ceare seofedun
hat ymb heortan; hungor innan slat
merewerges mod. þæt se mon ne wat
þe him on foldan fægrost limpeð,
hu ic earmcearig iscealdne sæ
winter wunade wræccan lastum,
winemægum bidroren,
bihongen hrimgicelum; hægl scurum fleag.

þær ic ne gehyrde butan hlimman sæ,
iscaldne wæg. Hwylum ylfete song
dyde ic me to gomene, ganetes hleoþor
ond huilpan sweg fore hleahtor wera,
mæw singende fore medodrince.
Stormas þær stanclifu beotan, þær him stearn oncwæð
isigfeþera; ful oft þæt earn bigeal,
urigfeþra; ne ænig hleomæga
feasceaftig ferð frefran meahte.

OK; so, there's part of the poem. Let's talk about what we do and don't know about it. We don't know when exactly these words were composed, or by whom--the poem is anonymous. But the poem comes down to us from the Exeter Book, a manuscript held by Exeter Cathedral. And a project to make this entire manuscript digitized is under way. The manuscript dates to around the last decades of the 10th century and contains a rich selection of other works, including some really funny and engaging riddles. In terms of the language of the poem, let's just review some terminology.

So, the language of "The Seafarer," as we have said, is called Old English and is the language of England before, say, 1100. If you have worked with Chaucer, you've also been exposed to Middle English, which we associate with the dates 1100 to 1500 and sounds something like this: "Whan that Aprill with his shoures sote/ The droghte of Marche hath perced to the rote,/ And bathed every veyne in swich licour,/ Of which vertu engendred is the flour..." and so on. Those are the first 4 lines of *The Canterbury Tales*. What you might notice is even though that sounds really unusual, notice how much easier it is for you to understand the basic gist of the Middle English as opposed to the Old English. Even though, as I'll be describing later, we are still speaking Old English in some ways, the fact is that if you want something like "The Seafarer" to be comprehensible to a modern-day audience, you need to translate it. And what that means then, is that as a translation as we're reading, what you're reading represents a series of judgment calls—an interpretation--that Dr. Echard, our translator, has undertaken.

And indeed, there are lots of other translations of "The Seafarer," and you can see just from looking at the first line how different some of those are. So that verb "wrecan," which means "deliver" or "pronounce," can mean "recite," or "narrate," or "utter," or "reckon." Or in Burton Raffel's translation it's sort of bypassed altogether and he just says for the first line, "This tale is true, and mine." This word "soðgied" is also really interesting: "soth" means "truth," like a "soothsayer," the expression we have now, and "gied" means a kind of "narrative," so "truth-song" is in some ways the most literal translation. By the way, the title "The Seafarer" was given to the poem by later editors. It also represents a kind of judgment call. As we talk about the poem, you might think about alternative titles that you would give it and how those would affect the way the audience perceives the poem. If it were up to me, for example, I might call the poem "Soðgied," or "Truth-song," because that's what the poet says it is. But there are lots of other things that you could call it as well.

OK; so. Let's switch now to our part where we think about the content of the poem and ideas and themes that are operative within it, all right? Just one piece of advice: if this poem feels sort of vague and enigmatic to you, it's not you: it's the poem. OK?

So, as we think about what to do with this or other complex poems, one thing I like to do is just look at the pronouns working in a poem and see what we can learn from that. So if we look here we can see, that early on in the poem there's a lot of "I." In Old English it's "ic." OK: again, the "I" of the poem—freezing cold, missing kinfolk, things like that. Very much sort of a palpable sense of the experience of the "I." If we go down to the bottom of the poem, though, you will see a shift. And you can read it in the modern English translation, where we have "us" and "we," and you will also see this "we" in the Old English. And this is where—this is what I meant when I said like in some ways we are kind of still speaking Old English, because our pronouns are very similar.

So, if you look at this "we" you'll see it's a specific kind of "we"—you know, "so that we might go to that eternal blessedness...Let there be thanks to God that he has honored us." So it's a pretty specific "us"—a kind of Christian union with God. The scholar Stanley Greenfield has described this poem as a "call to conversion," and I think any reading of the poem has to sort of come to terms with the movement in the poem from the "I" to this Christian "we."

However, the whole process by which the "I" of the poem gets there is a very complex journey, which is good, because it gives us lots of things to talk about. Michael Matto has a really interesting article that covers all of this with a lot of sophistication and insight; I cite that in the last slide, so I recommend that. For our purposes here, I will just propose that the "I" of the poem seems to emerge through its dialogue with many different things. Just a partial list: if you reread the poem you'll see the "I" in dialogue with weather, with birds, with the larger soundscape, with the sea itself, with kinfolk or the earthly pleasures that the speaker is not experiencing; with God, and then a kind of self-reflexive thing with the speaker's own spirit and mind. And to talk about that a little bit more, I thought we could look at one specific passage.

OK. So, look at what happens down here. So the poet says "Indeed now my spirit takes flight beyond my bound breath/ my heart flies wide over the sea stream,/ over the whale's realm,/ the surfaces of the earth; comes again to me/ ravenous and greedy." OK; and you can see here the "hyge" which is Old English for "spirit or mind," bursts out of this "hreðerlocan" which is sort of means like an enclosure where your heart is. And then goes out over the ocean, comes back greedy, and you know, it's weird: earlier in the poem the ocean sounded like such a cold and unfriendly place. Here all of a sudden it sounds kind of transcendent and awesome. And it makes me wonder what has changed in the interim: this seems kind of like an "Ocean 2.0." We know that the spirit is greedy when it comes back, but we don't know specifically what it's greedy for. The sort of physical situation of the speaker seems to have changed: we can't even tell really if the speaker's in a boat anymore or a ship. There's no easy answer to some of these issues, but I think the point might be that the poet is making room for us to think through these issues. The poet doesn't directly say, "Hey, YOU," to the audience, but I think we're

being invited to let our own hearts and minds range widely over the poem itself. In this respect the poem reminds me in some ways of the riddles of the Exeter manuscript, which also encourage readers to sort of actively participate in the creation of knowledge.

OK. So now I'm going to shift to the final part of the video, which will talk about interpretations and adaptations from a modern-day perspective. We already saw how Ezra Pound, a 20th-century poet, produced a translation and adaptation of "The Seafarer:" he leaves out all the God parts. Also, the artist Caroline Bergvall in 2014 published *Drift*, a poetic work that sort of talks back to and assimilates "The Seafarer" in many different ways. And even that title—right there you see another judgment call. You can find Bergvall on YouTube reading from this work, and in the scholarly book *The Contemporary Medieval in Practice* by Clare Lees and Gillian Overing there's a really interesting interpretation of what Bergvall was up to.

It's also interesting to put "The Seafarer" next to non-medieval poems that also sort of connect the ocean or bodies of water with, if you will pardon the expression, a kind of fluid sense of self. So we might read "The Seafarer" next to Emily Dickinson's "The Moon is distant from the Sea" and think about how both poems deal with an enigmatic self and yearning or desire. We might read "The Seafarer" next to "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" by Langston Hughes and think about how in both poems bodies of water are used for of complex self-construction and also calls to community. We might even read "The Seafarer" and then watch *The Lighthouse* and think about how the self and a sort of violent environment are depicted in both works for kind of enigmatic purposes.

So, I'll leave it there, and I'll just say that it would be really interesting to think of *your* "truth-song" and how it could emerge in relation to "The Seafarer." I would love to see anything you could create that would sort of respond to this poem. So, here's my "works cited," and thanks a lot for viewing.

OK: if you still hung around, I just want to talk really quickly about *h*-clusters in Old English because I think they're cool. You know, we have consonant clusters—*st*, *ch*, *sh*—in modern-day English. In Old English they also had these *h*-clusters that I think are pretty cool. So within the poem "The Seafarer," you have "hrim-gicelum" which is usually translated "icicles;" but "hrim" means something more like "frost," so I like to translate it "frost-cicles." You also have "hring-pege," a "ring-banquet;" "hwæl-weg" a kenning--a metaphorical compound that describes the ocean as kind of the whale's area; "hleahtor," which I think is a lot "laughier" than our word "laughter." Other words that aren't in the actual poem but are still cool: you have "hraefn" meaning "raven;" "hlaf" meaning "loaf;" "hliep," meaning "leap." In *Beowulf*, you might remember Hrothgar, that character, there's an *hr* cluster, or Beowulf's sword is called Hrunting. (We never learn the name of Beowulf's mother but we do learn the name of his sword, so...go figure.) And the final one I'll share is "hwisprian," meaning "to whisper," which is a cool word. So I'm not saying we should try to bring these *h*-clusters back into modern-day

English, but if you are interested in doing so, let me know and I will join your movement. All right--thanks very much!