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Deor

The general structure of this poem is clear enough. Five references are made to disastrous situations of a mythical or historical nature, each followed by the encouraging line of the refrain. The poet then goes on to reflect in Christian terms on the vicissitudes of life, after which he tells of another sad situation which he fictitiously attributes to himself. The poem ends with the optimistic re-statement of the refrain line. *Deor* shares some features with the longer poem *Widsiþ* which is also fictitious and in the first person. *Deor* refers allusively to a few well-known stories, *Widsiþ* does the same to a large number, though in most cases merely listing the names and nationalities of many important historical figures of Germanic story. It is possible that both poems are to be regarded as repertory pieces, poems with which a *scop* might introduce himself to a new audience and in so doing give a specimen of his art and at the same time imply the great extent of his *repertoire*. The constant harping in *Widsiþ* on the great generosity with which the fictitious narrator has been treated by great lords lends some support to this theory. Thus ll. 65-7 read: 'And I was . . . among the Burgundians, where I received a ring. There Guðhere gave me a glorious treasure as a reward for song; that was no niggardly king.'

The stories told in *Deor* are discussed rather briefly by Kemp Malone in his edition, and most of them in more detail by R. W. Chambers in his edition of *Widsiþ*. The story of Weland, which covers the first two sections of the poem, was well-known in Old English, several references to him being made in *Beowulf* and elsewhere. He was the mythical smith-god, whom King Niðhad captured and made to work for him, having ham-strung him. He gained his revenge by killing the king's two sons and raping his daughter Beadohild, who became pregnant. In some versions

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of the story she gave birth to the well-known hero Widia, who became involved in various stories relating to Eormanric (see below). The various versions of the Weland story are well attested in Norse and continental accounts. The story of Geat and Mæðhild is obscure, but it appears from two recently recorded ballads, one Norwegian and one Icelandic, that Mæðhild dreamed that she was to drown in a river, and so it came about. Geat succeeded by the power of his harp in rescuing her from the water-demon. The story of Peodric presents difficulties. It is not clear from the context whether he is to be pitied or his subjects. There are two candidates for this role, Theoderic the Frank (Kemp Malone's choice), and Theoderic the Goth, who ruled for thirty-three years at Ravenna, was a just and competent ruler, but was an Aryan heretic and responsible for the death of Boethius. He thus might well have been regarded as an evil tyrant by later Christians, and the thirty-three years is not far off the thirty of the poem. There is unfortunately no evidence to connect the name *Mæringa burg* with Ravenna, or indeed anywhere else. However on balance it seems that Chambers is right in believing that he is the king here referred to. Eormanric, king of the Goths at an important point in their history, who died c. 375, became an even more important figure in many Germanic stories, in some of which he emerged as the type of the cruel and treacherous tyrant. Heorrenda was a poet in a famous story who successfully assisted his king, Heoden, in the wooing of Hild. These stories are more adequately summarised by J. C. Pope, *Seven Old English Poems*, pp. 92-6.

The conventional nature of the philosophical passage, ll. 28-34, can be seen by comparison with a passage from *The Fortunes of Men*, ll. 64-7:

'Swā missenlice	meahtig Dryhten
geond eorþan scēat	eallum dǣleð,
scyrep ond scrifeð	ond gesceapo healdeð,
sumum ēadwelan,	sumum earfeða dǣl . . .'

'So variously mighty God throughout the regions of the earth

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shares out to all, He assigns and allots and holds men's destinies,
to one prosperity, to one a share of hardships. . . .'

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Deor

Wēlund him be wurman wræces cunnade,
ānhýdig eorl earfoþa drēag,
hæfde him tō gesiþþe sorge and longap,
wintercealde wræce; wēan oft onfond
5 siþþan hine Niðhād on nēde legde,
swoncre seonobende on sýllan monn.
Ðæs oferēode, þisses swā mæg.

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Beadohilde ne wæs hyre brōþra dēap
on sefan swā sār swā hyre sylfre þing,
10 þæt hēo gearolice ongieten hæfde
þæt hēo ēacen wæs; æfre ne meahte
þriste geþencan hū ymb þæt sceolde.
Ðæs oferēode, þisses swā mæg.

Wē þæt Mæðhilde mōne gefrugnon
15 wurdon grundlēase Gēates frige,
þæt hī sēo sorglufu slæp ealle binōm.
Ðæs oferēode, þisses swā mæg.

Ðēodric āhte þritig wintra
Māringa burg; þæt wæs monegum cūþ.
20 Ðæs oferēode, þisses swā mæg.

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Weland among the Wermas suffered woe,
High-minded lord, he went through torments long.
Sorrow and longing were his company,
Winter-cold exile. Hardship was his lot
After Nithhad with supple sinew-bonds
Condemned the better man to live in bondage.
That passed away, and so may this from me.

Beadohild grieved less for her brothers' death
Than for her own distress, when she perceived
That she was pregnant; she could not foresee
How that mishap could ever turn out well.
That passed away, and so may this from me.

We know that Meathhild the sad wife of Geat
Had endless cause for tears and lamentation.
Unhappy love deprived her of all sleep.
That passed away, and so may this from me.

Theodric ruled the city of the Mearings
For thirty years. That was well-known to many.
That passed away, and so may this from me.

1. *be wurman* has defied explanation. Some suggestions are: (i) that *wurman* would be the correct OE form for the Swedish tribe called the *Vermar*; but there is no reason to believe that Weland was connected with them; (ii) *wurman* is a form of *wyrmum*, 'serpents', which Malone suggests means 'swords', swords being frequently damascened in a snake-like pattern; compare *Judith* l. 222 where arrows are called *hildenaðran*; this interpretation is contextually unconvincing; (iii) various substitutions for *wurman* have been offered, but none of these is satisfying.

12. *þriste*, 'firmly', omitted in translation, the rest being paraphrased.

14. *mons* MS *monge*. Sense of a sort can be made of the MS reading, but this tentative proposal of Malone gives a more convincing meaning.

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We geāscodaþ Eormanrices
 wylfenne geþoht; āhte wīde folc
 Gotena rīces. Þæt wæs grim cyning.
 Sæt secg monig sorgum gebunden,
 25 wēan on wēnan, wýscte geneahhe
 þæt þæs cynerīces ofercumen wære.
 Þæs oferēode, þisses swā mæg.

Siteð sorgcearig, sǣlum bidǣled,
 on sefan sweorceð, sylfum þinceð
 30 þæt sý endelēas earfoða dǣl.
 Mæg þonne geþencan, þæt geond þæs woruld
 wītig Dryhten wendeþ geneahhe,
 eorle monegum āre gescēawað,
 wislicne blǣd, sumum wēana dǣl.
 35 Þæt ic bi mē sylfum secgan wille,
 þæt ic hwīle wæs Heodeninga scop,
 dryhtne dýre. Mē wæs Dēor noma.
 Āhte ic fela wintra folgað tilne,
 holdne hlāford, oþþæt Heorrenda nū,
 40 lēoðcræftig monn, londryht geþāh
 þæt mē eorla hlēo ær gesealde.
 Þæs oferēode, þisses swā mæg.

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We have heard much about the wolvish mind
 Of King Ermanaric who long controlled
 The people of the Goths: a cruel king.
 Many a man lived in the bonds of sorrow,
 Expected nought but grief, wished constantly
 That this dread kingdom might be overthrown.
 That passed away, and so may this from me.

The anxious, grieving man, deprived of joy,
 Lives with a darkened mind; it seems to him
 His share of sorrows will be everlasting;
 But he can think that in this world wise God
 Brings change continually: to many a man
 He offers grace, assured prosperity,
 But others he assigns a share of woe.
 About my own plight now I wish to speak:
 Once I was minstrel of the Heodenings,
 Dear to my patron, and my name was Deor.
 I held for many years a fine position
 And loyal lord, until Heorrenda now,
 That skilful poet, has received my lands,
 Which once my lord and master gave to me.
 That passed away, and so may this from me.

37. The preterite *wæs* is surprising; perhaps it merely stresses the fictitious nature of the poet's attribution of the story to himself.