



Life, Letters and Exile in Early Medieval England

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Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted. And while it is true that literature and history contain heroic, romantic, glorious, even triumphant episodes in an exile's life, these are no more than efforts meant to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement. Edward W. Said, 'Reflections on Exile' (2002)

Accounts of exile figure prominently in the literary and historical record of the English early Middle Ages. Sometimes separation from homeland and loved ones was imposed through banishment or the threat of harm, for others exile was voluntary. The experience of exile was of interest to early English poets, and some of the most powerfully evocative verse surviving from the period describes the experience in haunting and emotional terms. Most of these poems are in Old English and survive in the Exeter Book (Exeter Cathedral Library MS 3501), a vernacular poetic collection probably copied *c.* 970 (Gameson, 1996: 166). The provenance of this book is unknown, but it was undoubtedly given to the cathedral community at Exeter by Leofric (died 1072), the city's first bishop (Barlow, 1972: 6–9). The manuscript is described in two early donation lists and it remains at Exeter to this day (Niles, 2019: 49–52; Gameson 1996: 140–42; Conner 1993: 48–94). Among the many books given by the bishop, which mostly imply educational or liturgical use, this collection of poetry suggests a cultivated literary sensibility.¹ There is no doubt that the book contains poems that would offer conventional spiritual reading, though the presence

¹ (Gameson, 1996: 143, 147) suggests Leofric may not have had much choice in his acquisitions; (Tyler, 2016: 193–201) suggests a more deliberate literary interest is evident.

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of a great collection of riddles suggests wider interests on the part of the original compiler (Niles, 2019: 26–27).

We do not know how or why Leofric came to own the book, but it is highly unlikely that it was in Exeter when he arrived there (Gameson, 1996: 179–85). It is certain that Leofric was not the guiding intelligence of a collection made before he was born, but we might ask what it was about the book that led him to acquire it.² To my knowledge no study of the Exeter Book has connected the volume's great interest in the experience of exile with the fact that Leofric himself spent three decades living in exile. His departure from England is associated with the catastrophic final years of the reign of Æthelred the Unready (d. 1016), and his return with the accession to the English throne of Æthelred's son, Edward the Confessor (reigned 1042–1066), who lived for decades in exile in Northern France (Barlow, 1972: 1–2; Keynes 1991). Precisely where Leofric spent his time away from his homeland is unknown, and it is not known how old he was when he left England.³ His years abroad included a period of study in Lothringia connected with his ecclesiastical career (Barlow, 1972: 2). Leofric's association with the exiled sons of Æthelred in France is unknown, but he gained a position of prominence as a chaplain at Edward's court and enjoyed royal favour when promoted to his bishopric (Barlow, 1972: 2–3, 9). We cannot know if Leofric found a reflection of his own life experience in poems in the Exeter Book, but we do know that the most emotionally engaging and intellectually penetrating reflections on the experience of exile, separation and banishment survive uniquely in this book owned by a man who spent decades away from his homeland, uncertain of return.⁴ This essay takes as its starting point the intersection between the life and literature of exile in Leofric. After a brief discussion of the prominence of the theme of exile in the Exeter Book collection, I will explore the interplay between early English historical accounts of the experience of exiles and literary reflections of the theme of exile in poetry. History and poetry are interwoven, as aspects of lived experience inform the literary tropes of exile found in early English poetry, while historical writers imagine exile through these same tropes.

It is difficult to define the anthological principle guiding the selection and ordering of texts in the Exeter Book (Niles, 1019: 65–67; Sisam 1953: 97; Fulk & Cain, 2003: 27–28; Muir, 1994: I, ix). Its poems may be grouped into a number of thematic interests: the Christian religion;⁵ the natural order;⁶ wisdom poems;⁷ riddling, in the riddles and also the elegies (Niles, 2006: 4, 150–51; Klinck 1992: 49). *Widsith*, in which the eponymous narrator-poet Widsith ('the widely travelled one') describes a

² On Leofric's education and his books, see Treharne (2003).

³ Barlow (1972: 1) argues he must have been born (probably in the southwest or Cornwall) before 1016, as he was made bishop in 1046; Leofric died in 1072.

⁴ On Leofric as reader of the Exeter Book, see Tyler (2016: 196).

⁵ Including: the *Christ* poems; *Guthlac A and B*; *Azarias*; *Phoenix*; *Order of the World*; *Panther*; *Whale*; *Soul and Body II*; *Judgment Day I*; *Descent into Hell*; *Alms-Giving*; *Pharaoh*; *Lord's Prayer I*; *Homiletic Fragment II*; various riddles.

⁶ Including: *Azarias*; *Phoenix*; *Order of the World*; *Panther*; *Whale*; *Partridge*; various riddles.

⁷ Including: *Azarias*; *Precepts*; *Vainglory*; *Fortunes of Men*; *Maxims I*; *Order of the World*; *Riming Poem*; *Soul and Body II*; *Resignation*; a number of the elegies; various riddles.

historically impossible list of peoples he has visited, is difficult to categorize according to these more readily definable interests. *Widsith* is often read as a “catalogue poem”, perhaps describing a poetic repertoire (Howe, 1985: 166–90). However, the poem fits very appropriately into another important theme uniting many poems in the Exeter Book: exile (Niles, 2019: 7, 132, 143; Greenfield 1953).

The first group in the codex is loosely united by the theme of spiritual exile, notably in the opening group on overtly Christian topics. The collection begins with the *Advent Lyrics*, the first of three poems about Christ, whose incarnation brought relief to the *wergum wreccan* (l. 264, “weary exiles”) longing for their heavenly homeland. The following poems, *Guthlac A* and *B*, present episodes from this Mercian saint’s voluntary exile *on westennum* (l. 81, “in the wilderness”). *Azarias*, which follows, frames the two songs of the three exiled Jewish youths in the Babylonian furnace, lamenting the sins which have led “to exile across the wide earth” (l. 21, *towrecene geond widne grund*). *Phoenix* describes the mythical bird whose cyclical consummation by fire and rebirth allegorically represents the choice of eternal life after the *sarwraece* (l. 382, “sorrowful exile”) of life in the world. *Juliana* recounts the saint’s passion, including a devil’s lengthy confession, admitting his role in Fall and the exile of Adam and Eve (ll. 494–505). Many of the following poems after this group return to the thematic interests found across it. The theological focus is clear in poems such as *Panther* (an allegory of the incarnate Christ), *Judgment Day I*, and *Descent into Hell*. The theme of exile and separation is also prominent in many of the poems, most obviously in the group treated together by critics as the “elegies”. The first of these is *The Wanderer*, which follows immediately after *Juliana*. The remainder are found across the book: *The Seafarer*; *Deor*; *Wulf and Eadwacer*; *The Wife’s Lament*; *The Husband’s Message*; and *The Ruin*.

Both Leofric and his future patron, Edward the Confessor, lived in exile after the collapse of English rule in England. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle reports Edward’s first exile in Normandy, beside his parents and brother, after Swein of Denmark’s defeat of King Æthelred (C1013):

And seo hlæfdige gewende þa ofer sæ to hire breðer Ricarde and Ælfsige abbud of Buruh mid hire. And se cyning sende Ælfun bisceop mid þam æpelingum Eadwerde and ÆlfrEDE ofer sæ þæt he hi bewitan sceolde. And se cyning gewende þa fram ðam flotan to þam middan wintra to Wihhtlande and wæs ðær þa tid, and æfter þære tide wende ofer ða sæ to Ricarde and wæs ðær mid him oþ þone byre þæt Swegen wearð dead.

[And the queen [Emma-Ælfgifu] went across the sea to her brother Richard, and Abbot Ælfsige of Peterborough with her, and the king sent bishop Ælfhun across the sea with the athelings Edward and Alfred, that he should take care of them. And the king then went from the fleet to the Isle of Wight at Christmas and spent that season there; and after the festival he turned across the sea to Richard and was there with him until the event of Swein’s death.]

After Swein’s death the following year, the young Edward returned to England with a diplomatic party negotiating the terms of his father’s return (Licence, 2020: 33–34). Across the following two years, however, Swein’s son Cnut aggressively asserted

his own right to rule England, achieving total victory over Æthelred's successor (and son of his first marriage), Edmund Ironside, in 1016. After this, Æthelred's remaining sons had to look to their safety, and the younger sons of his second marriage, Edward and Alfred, would endure long period of exile; unless he had stayed abroad in 1014, it is likely that the young Leofric would have left again in 1016 or soon after.

An atheling's safety in exile could not be assumed, and while Edward and Alfred found a home in Normandy, they would have maintained a low profile to avoid Cnut's murderous intentions towards potential claimants to the throne (Keynes, 1991). Cnut's pattern of treachery against other athelings is reported in the Chronicle:

C1017: And Cnut cyning aflymde ut Eadwig æpeling and eft hine het ofslean [And king Cnut exiled the atheling Eadwig and afterwards had him killed]
 D1057 Her com Eadward æpeling to Engalande, se wæs Eadwerdes broðor sunu kynges, Eadmund cing, Irensid wæs geclypod for his snellsceipe. Bisne æpeling Cnut cyng hæfde forsend on Ungerland to beswicane [This year the atheling Edward came to England who was the son of King Edward's brother, King Edmund who was called Ironside because of his valour. This atheling King Cnut had banished to Hungary in order to betray him]

Cnut's wish that Edward be murdered went unfulfilled, though this Edward never took the throne (Tyler, 2016: 186). The strategy of exile, betrayal and murder was not unique to Cnut.⁸

In an imaginatively crafted episode in his *Ecclesiastical History*, Bede reports the early seventh-century exile of Edwin, future king of Northumbria (Book 2, Chap. 12):

When he was being persecuted by Æthelfrith, who reigned before him, for many years he wandered hidden as a fugitive (*occultus ... profugus uagaretur*) through many places and kingdoms, until at last came to Rædwald, asking him to protect his life by keeping it safe against the treacherous plots of his powerful persecutor. Rædwald willingly receiving him promised to do what he asked. But when Æthelfrith understood that he had turned up in that province, and that he and his companions were entertained as friends by Rædwald, he sent messengers offering Rædwald large sums of money to murder him. But this had no effect. He sent a second time, he sent a third time, offering ever larger gifts of silver, and threatening to make war on him if rejected the offer. Either broken by his threats, or corrupted by his gifts, he gave in to his request, and promised either to kill Edwin, or to give him up to envoys.

The exiled prince is warned of impending betrayal by one of his trusted companions, who offers to lead him from Rædwald's court to a new hiding place:

He answered, 'Thank you for you good intentions, but I cannot do what you suggest, because I would be the first to break the agreement (*pactum*) that I have made with this mighty king, who has done me no ill nor shown me no

⁸ A fate avoided in *Hamlet*, Act 4, Scene 3, 'The present death of Hamlet'.

enmity until now. If I must die, let it rather be at his hand than at the hands of a less noble person. For where now shall I now flee (*fugiam*), when for so many years I have been a refugee (*uagabundus*) across all the provinces of Britain, trying to escape the plots of my enemies?'

Bede's account ascribes to Edwin the full emotion of exile, bereft of homeland and loved ones, and vulnerable to despair:

When his friend was gone, Edwin remained alone outside, and sitting sorrowful in front of the palace, began to be assailed by the surge of many thoughts (*multis coepit cogitationum aestibus affici*), not knowing what to do or which way to direct his feet. He remained for a long while in silent anguish of spirit and being eaten away by an inner fire (*et caeco carperetur igni*)

Edwin's turmoil is relieved by a mysterious vision that precipitates his later conversion to Christianity, while Rædwald, persuaded by his queen, resolves not to betray his friend and guest. Not long after, with Rædwald's help, Edwin would gain the Northumbrian throne.

Bede's account engages with both psychological realism and literary trope, and is as much concerned with Edwin's interior experience as the machinations of Æthelfrith's plot. This attention to interiority begins, ironically, with Rædwald, whose motivation in betraying Edwin Bede claims not to know. Bede is playing a game here: writing a century after the events described, he has no knowledge of Edwin's emotions or thoughts either, but nevertheless incorporates these to create a sympathetic portrait. This sympathy is generated through conventional imagery of exile, which while not unique to the Old English elegies, is familiar to the modern reader of early English literature through them (Greenfield, 1955). The shared recurrence of a number of tropes across Edwin's experience and *Wanderer* is particularly striking. Like Edwin, the *Wanderer's* speaker is an involuntary exile. The *Wanderer* is not a prince, but nevertheless participates in aristocratic society, a noble exile seeking a new "lord" (l. 35, *goldwine*; l. 41, *mondryhten*). His anonymity and status create an identifiable figure for the kind of readers that can be presumed in the literary milieu of a social elite (Heyworth, 2004: 3–11). The imagery of lost homeland and community would speak to any such exile, either literal or spiritual, as the *Wanderer's* emotive language focuses on the experience of trauma and loss, rather than precise circumstance.

Less general parallels are also apparent between the poetic *eardstapa* (6; earth-stepper, wanderer) and Edwin, who somewhat awkwardly in Bede's Latin doesn't know "which way to direct his feet". Edwin is presented literally as a wanderer himself (*profugus uagaretur, uagabundus*), and like the speaker of *Wanderer* seeks protection. Like the *Wanderer* he sits apart from others as he contemplates his life and fate: *remansit ... solus foris; gesæt him sundor æt rune* (l. 111, "sat separately in meditation").⁹ Edwin explains his motivations to his unnamed friend, but keeps his

⁹ Also lines 8–9: *Oft ic sceolde ana uhtna gehwylce mine ceare cwīpan* (Alone at each dawn, I should often lament my sorrow). The image of the exile sitting apart is also developed in *Deor*, lines 28–30).

emotions to himself in silence (*tacitis*). In this regard, he closely follows *Wanderer's* precept (ll. 11–18):¹⁰

Ic to soþe wat
 þæt biþ in eorle indryhten þeaw,
 þæt he his ferðlocan fæste binde,
 healde his hordcofan, hycge swa he wille.
 Ne mæg werig mod wyrde wiðstandan,
 ne se hreo hyge helpe gefremman.
 Forðon domgeorne dreorigne oft
 in hyra breostcofan bindað fæste.

[I know as a truth that it is a noble custom in a man that he firmly bind his chest, guard his heart, think what he will. A weary mind cannot withstand fate, nor the bitter thought offer help. Therefore those eager for glory often tightly bind some sorrowful thing in their hearts.]

Bede imaginatively develops the imagery of Edwin's troubled mind in a way that at times parallels the imagery of elegiac exiles; most obviously, Edwin is *mestus* (*maestus*, sad, sorrowful), a straightforward parallel to the emotive state not only of the *Wanderer* (l. 2, *modcearing*; l. 9, *mine ceare*; l. 20, *earnmcearig*; l. 30, *sorg*; etc.), but also the speakers of *Seafarer* (l. 4, *bitre breastceare*; l. 10, *ceare*; etc.), *Deor* (l. 28, *sorgcearig*), *Wulf and Eadwacer* (l. 15, *murnende mod*) and *Wife's Lament* (l. 1, *ful geomorre*).

Bede's *maestus* is immediately developed (with assonance) into a more complex image centred on the noun *aestus*, which describes the heaving motion of the sea and waves, but also the surge of flame, often used metaphorically in Classical Latin to depict a troubled mind (Lewis & Short, 1879: s.v. *aestus*). Similar imagery is found among the elegies, especially in *Wanderer* and *Seafarer*, as both poems develop an elaborate metaphorical association between the mind and the movement of the sea. In both the speakers' mind (or spirit) is urged across the sea: *Wanderer* (ll. 55–57), *Cearo bið geniwad | þam þe sendan sceal swiþe geneahhe | ofer waþema gebind werigne sefan* ("Sorrow is renewed for him who must very often send his weary spirit across the binding of the waves"); *Seafarer* (ll. 63–64), *hweteð on hwælweg hreþer unwearnum | ofer holma gelagu* ("urges the mind suddenly onto the whale-road over the surface of the sea"), (ll. 4–6), *bitre breostceare gebiden hæbbe, | gecunnad in ceole cearselda fela, | atol yþa gewealc* ("[I] have endured bitter sorrow, known many hall-sorrow in the ship, the terrible tossing of the waves").

In *Seafarer* the image of the surging sea is blended with imagery of the surge of fire and heat (ll. 10–11): *þær þa ceare seofedun | hat ymb heortan* ("there the sorrows sighed hot around the heart"). The same dual metaphor is found in Bede's depiction of Edwin's troubled spirit tossed on the surge of the waves and/or fire, but

The exiled King Heremod in *Beowulf*, lines 1714–15, is also depicted as a solitary figure lines 1714–15.

¹⁰ Edwin's refusal to break his *pactum* is also echoed in advice found in *The Wanderer* (line 112): *Til biþ se þe his treowe gehealdeþ* (Happy is he who keeps his pledge). The edition cited is Krapp & Dobbie (1936).

also “eaten away by an inner fire” (*caeco carperetur igni*). Bede has borrowed the image of Edwin’s slowly combusting sorrows from Virgil’s description of Dido at the opening of Book 4 of the *Aeneid* (2, *caeco carpitur igni*). A more apt comparison might be with Aeneas himself, a refugee prince with a destiny whose situation parallels Edwin’s in various ways. However, Bede’s borrowing seems to represent the influence on his thought of late Antique commentary on this line. As we have seen, Bede draws attention to Edwin’s silence and the exile’s necessary concealment of his inner turmoil. This same focus is found in Servian commentary on the verse, which points out Dido’s own need to keep her feelings hidden: “Dido wishes to keep her love secret if possible, therefore ‘inner’ (*ceaco*)”. The Servian commentary also notes that the concealment of emotion makes a feeling more intense, which the commentary compares to a line from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* 4.64: whence Ovid, “the more it is concealed, the more the fire surges (*aestuat*)” (Thilo, 1878–1884: *In Vergilii Aeneidos Libros* 4.2.1). The fire that eats away at Edwin’s spirit slowly devours him because he as an exile compelled to silence.¹¹

Like Edwin, Edward made it home safely and got his throne, and the eulogist who celebrated Confessor’s memory in a poem now found in the C and D versions of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle emphasizes his time of exile (ll. 15–21):

Wæs a bliðemod bealuleas kyng,
 þeah he lange ær, lande bereafod,
 wunode wræclastum wide geond eorðan,
 syððan Cnut ofercom kynn Æðelredes
 and Dena weoldon deore rice
 Engla landes XXVIII
 wintra gerimes, welan brytnodon.

[Always happy in mind was the guiltless king, though long ago, deprived of his land, he wandered in exile, widely across the earth, after Cnut overcame Æthelred’s family and Danes ruled the noble realm of England for twenty-eight years in succession, distributed the wealth.]

Edward the Confessor waited two and half decades before he could return to England, at first at the court of his half-brother, Harthacnut, after the death of Harold Harefoot. Edward’s safe return in 1041, followed by his accession to the throne in 1042 on Harthacnut’s death, presents a stark contrast to the ill-timed return of his brother Alfred.

The atheling Alfred, son of Æthelred the Unready and Emma-Ælfgifu of Normandy, made the mistake of returning to England with an armed company at the fraught moment of the complex power-plays between Cnut’s sons and their supporters. Things did not go well for the returning exile, as the annals for 1036 in the C and D versions of the Chronicle report (C):

¹¹ The Servian metrical and grammatical commentaries were known to Bede, but his knowledge of the commentary on the *Aeneid* is not otherwise attested; this work was, however, known to Aldhelm (Lapidge, 2006: 332).

Her com Ælfred, se unsceððiga æþeling, Æþelrædes sunu cinges, hider inn and wolde to his meder, þe on Wincestre sæt. Ac hit him ne geþafode Godwine eorl, ne ec oþre men þe mycel mihton wealdan, forðan hit hleoðrode þa swiðe toward Haraldes, þeh hit unriht wære.

[In this year Alfred, the guiltless atheling, son of King Æthelred, arrived here and intended to go to his mother, who dwelled at Winchester. But Earl Godwine did not allow him to, nor the other men who wielded great power either, because opinion leant greatly towards Harald, though this was not right.]

C lays the blame for the atheling's subsequent mistreatment squarely at the feet of Godwine, though D attempts to deflect this by omitting the earl's name. The fate of Alfred and his companions reveals the danger facing the returning exile (*Death of Alfred*, ll 6–10):

Ac Godwine hine þa gelette and hine on hæft sette,
and his geferan he todraf, and sume mislice ofslöh;
sume hi man wið feo sealde, sume hreowlice acwealde,
sume hi man bende, sume hi man blende,
sume hamelode, sume hættode.

[But Godwine then prevented him and placed him in captivity, and scattered his companions, and killed some in various ways; some were sold for money, some were cruelly murdered, some were bound, some were blinded, some were mutilated, some were scalped.]

The poet employs various classical Old English poetic conventions, but alliteration is generally treated beside rhyme as an ornament, rather than as an essential structural element. The *sum* series (ll. 7–10) recalls similar rhetorical patterning in other Old English poems, including *Wanderer* (80–84):¹²

Sume wig fornom,
ferede in forðwege, sumne fugel oþbær
ofer heanne holm, sumne se hara wulf
deaðe gedælde, sumne dreorighleor
in eorðscræfe eorl gehydde.

[Battle took some, carried of the way hence, a bird carried one over the high sea, the grey wolf dismembered one in death, a sad-checked one hid the man in the hollowed earth.]

These lines are paralleled in the Exeter Book by the extended *sum* sequence in *Fortunes of Men*, which is largely preoccupied with death and misfortune, though happiness at times intrudes. The unhappy fates with those in *Wanderer*: a wolf eats a young man's corpse (l. 12); others die of hunger or violently or are maimed (ll. 15–20);

¹² Also found prominently in the Exeter Book poems *Fortunes of Men* and *Gifts of Men*.

some become carrion on the gallows (ll. 33–42). Another fate is that of the exile, the *wineleas hæle* (l. 32, “friendless warrior”) forced into the dangerous lands of foreign peoples (l. 29, *elpeodigra*). The Chronicle poet’s catalogue of cruelty is informed not only by this rhetorical framing in classical Old English verse, but also its often-attendant morbid content. The poet both engages with and extends the poetic tradition of exile: in *Wanderer* and *Fortunes* the agents of suffering are fate and wild animals, depersonalized forces without malevolence. In *Death of Alfred* these are replaced by Earl Godwine, the consummate political player whose cruelty to the returning exiles is not to be rationalized in philosophical terms, but understood as the political exercise of violence by those in the kingdom “who wielded great power”. Alfred himself was taken to the island monastery of Ely, blinded on the ship (l. 19, *on scype man hine blende*), and soon died. The poet refuses the traditional appeal to destiny as a way of comprehending the suffering of the atheling and his followers, preferring to reframe their fates as a political act “that was not right”. From this perspective the exile of Alfred (and implicitly that of all exiles) is not the product of fate, but rather a tool of statecraft. We do not know if Alfred was personally known to Leofric of Exeter, though his fate must have been.

The experience of Alfred reveals the danger of return, a tension and mortal threat that may be found in *Wulf and Eadwacer* (ll. 6–7): *Sindon wælreowe weras þær on iǵe; | willað hy hine aþecgan, gif he on þreat cymeð* (“There are slaughter-cruel men there on the island; they will devour him if he comes with a troop of companions”). The same tension is apparent in Charlemagne’s letter to bishops Æthelheard of Canterbury and Ceolwulf of Lindsey (793×796) (Dümmler, 1895: 128; Whitelock 1979: 847). The letter asks the bishops to intercede with Offa of Mercia on behalf of English exiles who wish to return home:

Hence, relying on that friendship which once, when we were together, we established in loyal words, we have sent to your kindness these miserable exiles (*miseros ... exsules*) from their country, praying that you may intercede for them with my dearest brother King Offa, that they may be allowed to return to their native land in peace and without unjust oppression of any kind, and to serve anyone whatever. For their lord, Hringstan, has died. It seemed to us that he would have been faithful to his lord, if he had been allowed to remain in his own country. But to shun the danger of death, as he was wont to say, he fled to us; and was ever ready to purge himself with oath from disloyalty. We kept him with us for some little time, for the sake of reconciliation, not out of enmity.

Though framed as a letter from the Emperor of the Franks and invoking his political authority, the letter is also very much in the voice of its author, Alcuin of York, who recalls his friendship with the bishops (Bullough, 2003: 249). Alcuin addresses his distant friends in language that evokes the recurrent imagery of exile in the elegies, where those deprived of friends’ company look across the seas: ‘In no way do we think it right that the vast distance by land and the breadth of the stormy sea should disrupt the bonds of a friendship joined in Christ’. Alcuin’s words are more than literary play, reminding his readers that he himself shares in the condition of exile. Offa’s cruelty was notorious, and in 794, around the time Alcuin’s letter was written,

the Mercian king ordered the beheading of Æthelberht, king of East Anglia. Alcuin is realistic about the returning exiles' prospects:¹³

If indeed you can obtain peace by your prayer for these fellow-countrymen of his, let them remain in their own land (*patria*). But if my brother reply more harshly concerning them, send them back to us uninjured. It is better to live in exile (*peregrinari*) than to perish, to serve in a foreign land than to die in one's own.

The figure of the exiled king is familiar in early English history. In some cases this exile was voluntary, as for the West Saxon king Ine, who retired to Rome in 726. The involuntary exile of King Sigeberht of Wessex is reported in the Chronicle's annal for 757 (ABCDE755). Sigeberht's exile is presented as the consequence of his own unlawful and disloyal conduct, first deposed by Cynewulf and confined to Hampshire, and later exiled into the wild after murdering a loyal ealdorman (A): *ond hiene þa Cynewulf on Andred adræfde, ond he þær wunade oþ þæt hiene an swan ofstang æt Pryfetesfodan: ond he wręc þone aldormon Cumbran* ("and then Cynewulf drove him into the Weald, and he lived there until a swineherd stabbed him to death by the stream at Privett, and he avenged the ealdorman Cumbra"). While the chronicler undoubtedly wishes the reader to understand that Sigeberht got what he deserved, this is not so with the exile of King Alfred more than a century later. Alfred was also forced by his enemies to wander in wild places, an exile within his own kingdom (A878):

Her hiene bestel se here on midne winter ofer twelftan niht to Cippanhamme ond geridon Wesseaxna lond ond gesæton ond micel þæs folces ofer se adræfdon, ond þæs oþres þone mæstan del hie geridon ond him to gecirdon buton þam cyninge Ælfrede, ond he lytle werede unieþelice æfter wudum for ond on morfæstenum.

[In this year in midwinter after twelfth night the enemy came stealthily to Chippenham, and occupied the land of the West Saxons and settled there, and drove a great part of the people across the sea, and conquered most of the others; and the people submitted to them, except Alfred. He journeyed in difficulties through the woods and fen-fastnesses with a small force.]¹⁴

Alfred's experience would later become the subject of mythmaking and romance, but whatever the origins of the burnt cakes Alfred must have felt the full precariousness of his exile, uncertain of his return to power (Keynes, 1999). Only a few years earlier his brother-in-law Burgred, king of Mercia, had been forced by invading Danes into

¹³ In the *Vita Karoli Magni Chap. 21* Einhard reports the emperor's generosity to exiles (Firchow & Zeyde, 1972): *Amabat peregrinos et in eis suscipiendis magnam habebat curam* (He loved exiles and took great care in welcoming them).

¹⁴ Asser adds: 'For he had nothing to live on except what he could seize by frequent raids, either secretly or openly, from the pagans or even the Christians who had submitted to the rule of the pagans.'

permanent exile in Rome. Alfred, unlike Burgred or Sigebyrht, rallied support and was back in power within six months.

In the context of the Chronicle's wider narrative, Alfred's exile recalls that of his grandfather Ecgberht, who had been exiled among the Franks by Cynewulf's successor in Wessex, Beorhtric (ruled 786–802) with the support of Offa of Mercia, whose daughter Eadburh he married. Ecgberht returned to Wessex to become king on Beorhtric's death, though the Chronicle remains silent on how his predecessor died. The imaginatively embellished story is told by the Welsh monk Asser in his *Life of King Alfred*, written in about 893. The central figure is Queen Eadburh, who herself ends life in miserable exile (Chap. 14):

As soon as she had won the king's friendship, and power throughout almost the entire kingdom, she began to conduct herself in the manner a tyrant like her father—to detest every man whom Beorhtric liked, to do all things hateful to God and people, to accuse all those whom she could before the king, and so by deceit to deprive them of either life or power, and if she could not achieve that end with the king's compliance, she killed them with poison.

Eadburh's murderous conduct, coupled with Beorhtric's appeasement, eventually leads to his own death when the queen poisons a young nobleman, accidentally killing Beorhtric too. With Ecgberht on the throne, Eadburh was forced into exile (Chap. 15):

Accordingly, when Beorhtic was dead, since Eadburh was unable to stay any longer among the Saxons, she sailed overseas with countless treasures; she sought out Charles, the famous king of the Franks.

Charlemagne gave Eadburh a convent to govern, but Asser reports that she lived with such scandal that in the end she was forced into a further, more humiliating exile in northern Italy (Chap. 14):

When at last she was publicly caught in debauchery with a man of her own race, she was expelled from the convent on Charles's orders and shamefully spent her life in poverty and misery until her death; so much so that in the end, accompanied by a single slave boy (as I have heard from many who saw her) and begging every day, she died a miserable death in Pavia.

The antifeminist outline of Asser's portrait is simple: Eadburh was a murderous (Mercian) whore who ended up destitute in a foreign land, as she deserved. There is no sympathy for this exiled woman who could not control her violence or lust.

The experience of exile in the elegies more often assumes a male gender and the agency that this implies. However, two elegies, *Wulf and Eadwacer* and *Wife's Lament*, are spoken by a female voice, and the latter in particular delves into a woman's experience of exile in ways which may be sympathetic or not, but nevertheless includes tropes found Asser's portrayal of Queen Eadburh. The Wife's characterization also shares elements with the male speakers of *Wanderer*, *Seafarer* and *Deor*,

all focused on the experience of sorrow brought about by separation (Klein, 2006; Scheck, 2008). Like the Wanderer, the Wife finds herself alone and sorrowful at dawn (l. 7, *hæfde ic uhtceare*; l. 35, *ic ana on uhtan gonge*) and is a “friendless exile” (l. 10, *wineleas wræcca*). Some aspects of the Wife’s situation are precisely described, others are enigmatic: her husband travelled into exile, she had followed, but her husband’s family successfully plotted their separation; he has asked her to dwell in a wild place where she has no loyal friends (ll. 6–17).

Beside her lack of agency in the face of the machinations of her husband’s family, certain elements of the Wife’s character and situation are pronounced. The first is her compatibility with a man of violent disposition (ll. 18–21): *Ða ic me ful gemæcne monnan funde, | hearsælige, hygegeomorne, | mod miþendne, morþor hycgendne | bliþe gebæro* (“Then I found a man very suitable to me, ill-fated, sad at heart, concealing his mind, contemplating murder under a blithe countenance”). The Wife lives in a place which implies extreme poverty: *on wude bearwe | under actreo in þam eorðscrafe* (ll. 27–28, “in a forest grove, under an oak tree, in an earth-cave”). The longing for companionship created by the loss of community is a common theme across the elegies: the Wanderer searches for a new lord, and dreams of one whom he might *clyppe ond cysse | ond on cneo lecge honda ond heafod* (ll. 42–43, “embrace and kiss and lay hand and head on his knee”); the Seafarer has willingly embraced a life without the ceremony of the hall and the *hringþegu* (l. 44, “ring giving ceremony”) and “the joy of a woman” (l. 45, *to wife wyn*), though the *langung* (l. 47, “desire”) is ever present. The Wife’s desire is expressed more intensely, is more explicitly sexual, and seems at times to overwhelm her. The great distance placed between the Wife and her man caused her to “live most wretchedly” and “long for him” (l. 14, *lifdon laðlicost, ond mec longade*). Where previously they had sworn that nothing but death would divide them, it is now as if their *freondscip* (l. 25, “friendship”) had never been. This evocation of their marriage vow requires that the noun *freondscip* be read with the meaning of “the bond between lovers”, an intimacy reinforced in poem with the dual pronoun *uncer* (“our”, “of us two”). Her lost husband is not simply her ‘beloved’ but her ‘very beloved’ (26, *felaleofa*). The negation of this love by distance finds the Wife *oflongad* (l. 29, “seized with longing”), so that all that is left to her is to wander alone at dawn accompanied only by her desires (l. 41, *langop*). The Wife’s solitary dawn is framed differently from the Wanderer’s. She does not contemplate the death of family and friends in battle, but rather thinks about those lovers who, unlike herself, find themselves in each other’s arms at this private moment (ll. 33–36):

Frynd sind on eorþan,
leofe lifgende, leger weardiað,
þonne ic on uhtan ana gonge.
under actreo geond þas eorðscrafu

[There are lovers in the world, living dear ones, occupying beds, while I go alone each dawn under the oak tree through this earth-cave.]

.It is difficult not to find envy in her observation. In a poem only 53 lines long, the Wife explicitly mentions her desire four times, beside the recollection of her sexual

union with her lost husband, while fantasizing about lovers together in bed. The last word of the poem expresses, but comes nowhere near resolving, her frustrated desire: *Wa bið þam þe sceal of langþe leofes abidan* (l. 53, “Woe for them who must endure desire for a lover”).

The tone of *Wife’s Lament* is difficult to grasp. We do not know if the poem was written by a woman, in which case sympathy for the Wife’s plight is more likely, or if it reveals a male poet’s less sympathetic view of female psychology. Her loyalty to her husband leads the Wife into a life of double, or even triple, exile: among his kin when marrying; following him over the sea; and finally alone in her earth-cave. Such loyalty would normally be commended, but the dark talk of murder and sexual longing may suggest a less flattering portrayal beside elegies that resolve the tensions of separation and solitude by appealing to the abstract consolations of philosophy (*The Wanderer, Deor*) and religion (*The Seafarer, The Husband’s Message*) (Anlezark, 2015). The Wife’s situation is not far removed from Eadburh’s, who also experienced a three-fold exile: in marriage; the convent; and destitute in Pavia.

An equally controversial woman who also experienced repeated exile was Emma-Ælfifu, daughter of Duke Richard I of Normandy, the second wife of King Æthelred the Unready. As we have seen, in 1013 Emma went to exile in Normandy after the Danish conquest of England; after this she was “fetched” (D: *feccan*) to marry Cnut. Emma’s role in the succession crisis that witnessed the murder of her son Alfred is unclear, though some contemporaries suspected her of treacherous behaviour (Staford, 1997: 241–42). The accession to the English throne in 1037 Harold Harefoot, Cnut’s son by his first wife Ælfifu of Northampton, nevertheless spelled trouble for Emma-Ælfifu, who returned to exile (C):

And man draf ut his modor Ælfgyfe þa cwene, butan ælcere mildheortnesse,
 ongean þone wallendan winter, and heo com þa to Brygge, and Baldwine eorl
 hi wel þær underfeng, and þær geheold þa hwile þe hire need wæs.
 [And then [Harthacnut’s] mother, Queen Ælfifu, was driven out without any
 mercy to face the raging winter. And she then went across the sea to Bruges,
 and Earl Baldwin received her well there and maintained her there as long as
 she had need.]

The C Chronicler’s account moves beyond a bare record of events. The description of “the raging winter” into which the old queen is “mercilessly” driven is absent from the D Chronicle’s less emotive account of the same events. These additions, echoing the landscape and feeling of the elegies, are designed to generate an emotive response in the reader, though whether their inclusion suggests sympathy for the dowager queen rather than disdain for Harold Harefoot is difficult to determine.

Perhaps the best-known female Anglo-Saxon literary exile is the eighth-century nun Berhtgyth, who followed Saint Boniface into the mission field in Germany, in company with her mother Cynechild and brother Balthard. Three Latin letters written by Berhtgyth survive among the so-called “Boniface correspondence”, all of which are written to her brother Balthard. Her letters reveal Berhtgyth’s sophisticated education, including in Latin versification, and all complain of Balthard’s failure to visit her; as a nun she was not free to travel. The letters become increasingly plaintive as

a result of Balthard's continued absence. Berthgyth's letters reveal the great personal cost that could be paid by women who entered spiritual exile as missionaries. Her language can be highly formal, but even allowing for the florid emotion sometimes found early medieval letters, the feeling expressed by Berthgyth appears real (Fell, 1990; Dronke, 1984: 30–33). In places this recalls the Old English women's elegies *Wife's Lament* and *Wulf and Eadwacer*, and also *Husband's Message*. In her second letter Berthgyth demands ((Tangl, 1955: no. 143): "O brother, my brother, how can you afflict my mind, who am nothing, with constant grief, lament and sorrow, by day and night through the absence of your love". She laments the great bodies of water that lie *inter me et te* ((Tangl, 1955: no. 147), though united in love (*iungamur*). Despite the similarity to *Wife's Lament*, the love (*caritas*) that Berthgyth is missing undoubtedly spiritual. Berthgyth's constant request is that Balthard should visit her, but in a reply to communication from him that this is impossible, she accepts reluctantly that she must detach herself from worldly love "as you have commanded me to do" with the qualification that "in me our love would never grow destitute (*derelicta*)" ((Tangl, 1955: no. 148).

Among the elegies the theme of spiritual exile is most fully explored in *Seafarer*, a poem meaningfully read in the ascetical tradition of the "pilgrimage for the love of God" (Gordon, 1960: 9). Unique among the elegiac speakers, the *Seafarer* describes his desire for exile, despite all the suffering it might bring. The ascetical logic underpinning the poem finds redemptive value in suffering, which the speaker embraces in solitary exile (ll. 33–38):

Forþon cnyssað nu
 heortan geþohtas, þæt ic hean streamas,
 sealtyþa gelac sylf cunnige;
 monað modes lust mæla gehwylce
 ferð to feran, þæt ic feor heonan
 elþeodigra eard gesece.

[Therefore now the heart's thoughts impel, that I should explore the high seas, the surging salt waves; each time the mind's desire urges the spirit to travel, that I should seek a place among foreigners far away.]

The paradoxical motivation for this exile is joy, ultimately to be found outside *bis deade lif* (l. 65, "this dead life"). Despite its allegorizing rhetoric, *Seafarer* closely describes a lived reality familiar to the Anglo-Saxons, if not practiced by them. The 891 annal in the Chronicle reports a journey much like the *Seafarer's* (A):

Ond þrie Scottas comon to Ełfrede cyninge on anum bate butan ełcum gereþrum
 of Hibernia, þonon hi hi bestelton, forþon þe hi woldon for Godes lufan
 on elþiodignesse beon, hi ne rohton hwær.

[And three Irishmen came to King Alfred in a boat without any oars from Ireland, which they had left secretly, because they wished for the love of God to be in foreign lands, they cared not where.]

Among the Old English elegies the text of *Seafarer* most clearly echoes early Celtic traditions, both Irish and Welsh, indicating a poet acquainted with both the reality and spiritual significance of this radical form of exile (Niles, 2019: 60). *Seafarer* offers the reader a multi-layered way of understanding exile, centred on the highly conventional image of life in this world is exile from paradise, and embracing asceticism as the exile's pathway homeward to heaven.

Conclusion

The rhetorical gesture towards the abstraction or spiritualization of exile is familiar among the elegies, though the lived experience they evoke was real. The accounts of exile found across early English literature often present in imaginative terms the geographic condition of exile, and the emotional struggles caused by isolation from homeland and community. This experience was lived by Leofric, the owner of the Exeter Book, and by members of the West Saxon royal house, male and female, known to him. The historical records from the eighth to the eleventh century provide a stark reminder that exile was genuine for many Anglo-Saxon men and women. These records are often imaginatively embellished, but the emotion that they describe implies a shared understanding of what exile meant for the people who experienced it, and also reveal that these accounts were informed by recurrent literary tropes. It is highly likely that many exiles sought to comprehend their trauma through the solace of literature. The Wanderer ultimately finds consolation in a Boethian religious-philosophical attachment to the fixedness of the eternal creator, whose stability offers meaning to the mind almost overwhelmed by the mutability of the world under the heavens. Bede's Edwin experiences comfort in a visionary encounter that ultimately leads to his conversion as the first Christian king of the Northumbrians. We cannot know how Leofric read the century-old poetic anthology that came into his possession sometime after his return to England, but we can be certain that in it he would have found reflections of his own lived experience.

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