

## The Meaning of the Cotton “Wulf” Maxim in the Context of Anglo-Saxon Popular Thought and Culture.

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The sixty-six lines of the *Cotton Maxims* (*Maxims II*), like *Maxims I* of *The Exeter Book*, consist of a series of gnomic verses which "are pieces of universally accepted knowledge in the form of versified sentences" (Wrenn 164). Although some critics, notably Jackson J. Campbell, have been trying to unify the 66-line gnomic verses, the consensus so far is that *Maxims II* is not a consistent story with a strong unity but a collection of "gnomic sayings familiar in Old English ears," offering "a ranging variety in subject matter and spirit" (Kennedy 147). In reading of *Maxims II*, however, readers are puzzled over how the whole poem could be understood as a unit, for some of the maxims, including the "wulf" maxim, are not look like "pieces of universally accepted knowledge" to modern ears:

One problem in understanding the *Maxims* is determining the specific meanings of the reiterated *sceal* or *scyle*. In some cases the verb seems to have the force of moral obligation, fitness, or propriety; in others it merely suggests what is characteristic, customary, or inherent; in others it has a "sense of certainty which current dialectal varieties of the future(with will) bring out. . . ." The problem is especially acute in the 66-line *Maxims II*. . . . (Greenfield et al. 261)

As the citation indicates, the crux of the poem is its ambiguous use of "the reiterated *sceal* or *scyle*." Also Campbell, who tries to unify the whole work of *Maxims II*, admits that "The various items of the *sceal* series . . . are exceedingly difficult to connect in any logical or even emotional sequence, although sometimes two or three items do have a demonstrable relationship" (36). The paper focuses on the interpretation of the Cotton "wulf" maxim, expounding the Anglo-Saxon concept of "wulf" and identifying the specific meaning of *sceal* in the context of Anglo-Saxon popular thought and culture.

The wolf is most closely related with the hunting tradition in the Anglo-Saxon era. In his *Social England*, H. D. Traill briefly describes the Anglo-Saxon warriors:

The Anglo-Saxons were keen lovers of the chase, and hawking was also a favourite pastime. Practice with the bow and arrow and the sling afforded amusement to the young, besides training them in warlike pursuits. Boys were also encouraged to run, leap, wrestle, and join in other exercises requiring agility and strength. (218)

Joseph Strutt also observes that "the Germans, and other northern nations, were much more strongly attached to the sports of the field than the Romans, and accordingly they restricted the natural rights which the people claimed of

hunting," and "as early as the ninth century, and probably long before that period, hunting constituted an essential part of the education as a young nobleman" (58).

As hunting was an essential part of the Anglo-Saxon life, the wolf was one of the most favorite game beasts for the Anglo-Saxons. According to Beryl Rowland, wolf-hunting was a "part of a nobleman's training in ninth century England" (103). At that time, game animals were generally divided into three classes: the first class included four names of "beasts for hunting"—the hare, the hart, the wolf, and the wild boar; the second class, five "beasts of the chase"—the buck, the doe, the fox, the martin, and the roe; and the third class, three beasts of "'greate dysporte' in the pursuit"—the grey or badger, the wild cat, and the otter (Strutt 75).

There are numerous written records of wolf-hunting during the Old English period. In the tenth century, Welsh King Hywel Dda (Howel the Good) is said to have fixed "the price of a wolf's skin at eightpence," declaring that "it is free to all to slay them" (Edlin 25). Holinshed's *Chronicles* also recorded an episode which was related with wolves:

For as it is said, he[Edgar, Saxon King of England] appointed Iudweall or Ludweall King of Wales to present him with three hundred woolves yeerelie in name of a tribute, but after three yeeres space, there was not a wolffe to be found, and so that tribute ceased in the fourth yeere after it began to be paid. (695)

According to Strutt, Edgar imposed wolves' skins, instead of gold and silver as the tribute, upon the Welsh King, for "the extensive woodlands and coverts, abounding at that time in Britain, afforded shelter for the wolves, which were exceedingly numerous, and especially in the districts bordering upon Wales"

(76). Strutt also provides another example that "in the tenth year of William I, Robert de Umfraville, knight, held the lordship, & c., of Riddlesdale, in the country of Northumberland, by service of defending that part of the country from enemies and 'wolves'" (76).

As a whole, the purposes of the Anglo-Saxon wolf-hunting are quite evident: first, the Anglo-Saxons very much enjoyed wolf-hunting as their favorite pastime; second, they used wolf-hunting for the training of youngsters; third, they hunted wolves in order to keep down the number of wolves, the murderous beasts of prey—wolves "were so numerous that they might legitimately be caught with various snares and poison as well as with hounds" (Rowland 103).

Wolves appear frequently in the Bible and in folklore as aggressive tyrants, ungrateful and wicked creatures, or deceivers. However, wolves appear more abundantly in ancient mythologies. In Roman mythology, the wolf was a sacred animal to Apollo, a companion of Mars, and a nurse of Romulus and Remus (twin sons of Mars and Rhea Silvia, who founded the city of Rome). According to *The Facts on File Encyclopedia of World Mythology and Legend*, wolves are more frequent in Norse mythology than in any other mythologies: Fenrir (or Fenris), Freki and Geri, Jotunn, Skoll and Hati, and Valkyries. These personified wolves, more or less, have bad connotations: world destroyers, greedy and ravenous creatures, and devourers.

In Old English literary works, wolves are also frequent. Bosworth's *The Anglo-Saxon Dictionary (ASD)* defines the meaning of wolf in accordance with these OE examples:

- 1) Hwonne of heortan hunger oððe wulf sǣwle and sorge somed ābregde  
(*Genesis* 2276)

- 2) Sceal hine wulf etan, hār hæðstapa (*Be manna wyrðum* 12)
- 3) Se hāra wulf dēaðe gedælde (*The Wanderer* 82)
- 4) Wulfes gehlēðan (*The Riddles* 88, 23)
- 5) Reáfiende wulfas (*The Gospel of Saint Matthew* 7, 15)
- 6) Ic [the shepherd] stande afer mīne sceāp mid hundum ðe læs wulfas forswelgan hig (*Colloquium ad pueros linguae Latinae locutione exercendos ab AElfrico compilatum. Thorpe's Analecta* 20, 15)
- 7) Wulfa geþot ululatus (Thomas Wright's *Vocabularies* vol. 1. 287, 24)
- 8) Sume wurdon tó wulfan; ða ðuton ðonne hí spræcan sceoldon (*King Alfred's Anglo-Saxon Version of Boethius De Consolatione Philosophia* 38, 1)
- 9) Swá sceáp gemang wulfas (*The Gospel of Saint Matthew* 10, 16)
- 10) Wineleás, wonsæ-acute;lig mon genimeþ wulfas tó geféran (*Maxims I* 146)

*The Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* also illustrates that the wolf is a frequent figure in battle-scenes:

- 11) Ne wæl wépeþ wulf se græ-acute;ga, morþorcwealm mæcga, ac hit á máre wille (*Versus Gnomici* 147)
- 12) Ðæs se hlanca gefeah wulf in walde (*Judith* 206)
- 13) Ðæt græge deór, wulf on wealde (*The Battle of Brnanburh* 64b-65a)
- 14) Fyrdleóð ágól wulf on walde (*Elene* 28)
- 15) Wulf sang áhóf, holtes gehléða (*Elene* 112)
- 16) Wulfas sungon atol æfenleóð ætes on wénan (*Exodus* 164)
- 17) Se mæ-acute;sta dæ-acute;l ðæs heriges læg, hilde gesæ-acute;ged, wulfum tó willan (*Judith* 296)

In symbolic allusion, the wolf is compared to a cruel person:

18) Se biscop cwæp tó ðæm hæ-acute;þnan kásere: 'Ne gang ðú ná on Godes hús; ðú hafast besmitene handa, and ðú eart deófles wulf' (*The Shrine* 58, 9)

19) Se áwyrghda wulf (the devil) (*Cynewulf's Christ* 256).

Many compound words denote the nature of wolf. In *Beowulf* "brim-wylf" [sea-wolf] (1494) is used as an epithet applied to Grendel's mother, and the adjective form of "wulf," wylfen," appears in *Deor* (22) with a bad connotation, "wolfish or fierce" (*ASD*). "Wæl-wulf" [war-wolf; warrior] (*The Battle of Maldon* 96) is an epithet for the vikings and "were-wulf" (*Wulfstan* 191, 16), literally "a wer-wolf" [man-wolf], signifies a fiend: "Ðæt se wódfreca werewolf tó swýðe ne slíte, ne tó fela ábite of godcundre heorde" (*ASD*). "Wulf-heort" as an adjective means "wolf-hearted, cruel": "Onwóc wulfheort, se ær wíngál swæf, Babilone weard" (*Daniel* 116); "Wulfheort cyning" (*Daniel* 135, 247) (*ASD*). "wulfes heáfod" was used in reference to outlaws (*ASD*). According to OED's definition, wolf-head is "a cry for the pursuit of an outlaw as one to be hunted down like a wolf." Therefore, "wulfheáfedtreó" in *The Riddles of The Exeter Book*, 56, signifies a cross or gallows. "Weargtreów" in *Codex Diplomaticus Aevi Saxonci* has the same meaning with "wulfheáfedtreó." The word "wearg" came from the Old Saxon and Old High-German "war(a)g," and the Old Icelandic "varg-r," both of which signify "wolf" or "criminal" (*Altenglisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch*).

Likewise, the word "wolf" was negatively used in Old English writings as a greedy, cruel, rapacious, lonely, evil, and cursed creature. However, quite curiously, the word "wulf" was frequently used in Anglo-Saxon proper names

(and also in place-names). In Henry Sweet's glossary of *The Oldest English Texts*, there are sixty "wulf" names appearing in Old English writings. Hilmer Ström remarks that "uulf" is "an extremely common name-element in the Ge [Germanic] languages" (42). Furthermore, Ström believes that another extremely common OE name, "Offa" (and also "Uuffa"), is a variation of "wulf" on the ground that "Offa" is "an instance of the assimilation of  $l + f > ff$  and of a hypocoristic loss of  $w$ , as well as a transition of  $u > o$  (*a-umulaut*)" (85). In his "University Lectures," E. Ekwall explains the Anglo-Saxon admiration for the wolf by the frequency of "wulf" in proper names:

The use of *wulf* as a [name-element] may be illustrated by a reference to its occurrence in such OE compounds as *heoru-*, *here-*, *hilde-*, *wælwulf*, which are simply more or less picturesque kennings for "warrior." (Ström 48)

In *Über die Namen des Nordhumbrischen Liber Vitae*, p. 126, R. Müller translates *-wulf* with "hero" (Ström 48). So, *The Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* interprets some OE *-wulf* compounds as epithets of warriors:

- 1) *heoru-wulf* (Exodus 181), "a fierce wolf, a warrior."
- 2) *here-wulf* (Genesis 2015), "a war-wolf, a warrior."
- 3) *wælwulf* (The Battle of Maldon 96), "a war-wolf, a warrior, one who is as fierce to slay as is a wolf."

In a sense, this common use of "wulf" in proper names seems to imply that the Anglo-Saxons, like Native Americans, liked wolves or even admired them for their fierceness and rapacity.

There appears another example showing a positive view of the wolf in

"King Edmund" of *AEfric's Lives of Saints*:

Ða læg se græga° wulf þe bewiste° þæt heafod, and mid his twam fotum° hæfde þæt heafod beclypped°, grædig and hungriġ, and for Gode ne dorste þæs heafdes abyrian°, and heold hit wið deor. (ll. 127-130)<sup>1)</sup>

[There lay the gray wolf who had been guarding the head, and with his two feet had embraced it, greedy and hungry, and yet for fear of God had not dared to eat it, but had kept it safe against other animals.]

Here, by God's care, the wolf guards King Edmund's head against other beasts. This episode, on the one hand, signifies that the cruelest wolf, who is even greedily hungry, can serve as an agent of God's providence. On the other hand, Danish pirates, who beheaded Edmund, are more brutish and monstrous than the very icon of malevolence, the wolf. The writer, therefore, could deliver his message more effectively by employing the image of the cruel, wicked, and greedy wolf—the common Old English concept of the animal—in portraying the brutish humans.

In spite of such exceptional cases, it is evident that "wulf" on the whole was an evil creature in the context of Anglo-Saxon popular thought and culture. This concept of wolf—the wicked, lonely creature—may help to interpret the wolf gnome in *Maxims II*: "wulf sceal on bearowe, / earm anhaga" (ll. 18b-19a). Paradoxically enough, it is hard to understand the "wulf" gnome as a gnome because of its simplicity. Charles W. Kennedy defines a gnome as "a maxim, or proverb, or brief, pithy, sententious saying," as in the following passage:

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1) From *Sweet's Anglo-Saxon Primer*, 9th ed.

Translation from <http://faculty.virginia.edu/OldEnglish/aelfric/edmund.html>



In Old English poems gnomes are employed, sometimes to set forth proverbial or folk wisdom, sometimes in more elaborate form to affirm a moral, or define a virtue or vice. Their concise brevity, framed in the alliterative pattern of Old English verse, endows them with the aphoristic and trenchant memorability, which is an outstanding quality of the type. (146-147)

The "wulf" gnome of *Maxims II*, however, contains neither proverbial wisdom nor moral obligation in spite of its conciseness. On the contrary, the "wulf" gnome of *Maxims I* is explicitly suggestive and meaningful:

Wineleas, wonsælig mon      genimeð him wulfas to geferan,  
felafæcne deor.      Ful oft hine se gefera sliteð;  
gryre sceal for greggum,      græf deadum men;  
hungre heofeð,      nales þæt heafe bewindeð,  
ne huru wæl wepeð      wulf se græga,  
morþorcwealm mæcga,      ac hit a mare wille. (ll. 146-151)<sup>2)</sup>

[Friendless, an unhappy man takes with him the wolves as companions, treacherous beasts. Full often his companion attacks him. Fear is for the gray ones, the grave for the dead men. The gray one, the wolf, will lament for hunger, and it will circle the grave. Nor indeed will it weep on account of the slaughter, for the men violently killed, but it always wants more.]

In this gnome, the wolf appears as a treacherous companion of the social outcast, or a kind of outcast himself. Its portrayal reveals that the gnome reflects the general Anglo-Saxon connotation of wolf. However, the "wulf" gnome of *Maxims II* simply describes the wolf as "the wretched solitary being" who lives

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2) From *The Exeter Book, Part II*. [http://www.sacred-texts.com/neu/ascp/a03\\_13.htm](http://www.sacred-texts.com/neu/ascp/a03_13.htm)  
Translation from <http://fred.wheatonma.edu/wordpressmu/mdrout/category/maxims-i/>

in "the forest." Then, what messages can we get from this simple description?

First of all, the crux of this gnome lies in the controversial verb "sceal," for the whole gnome can be changed according to various interpretations of "sceal." Patrick L. Henry, on the one hand, argues that "gnomic *sceal* typically expresses the notions of customary action or state, inherent quality and characteristic property" (103). Then, the line "wulf sceal on bearowe" can be translated into this in modern English: "It is customary or characteristic that the wolf is in the forest." On the other hand, Paul Beekman Taylor claims that the Old English *sceal*-maxims "embody expressions about what should be, how things should function" (388). According to Taylor's interpretation of "sceal," the modern English translation of the wolf gnome of *Maxims II* is that "The wolf ought to be in the forest." Taylor's interpretation is convincing because, although there is no moral obligation here, a natural or universal obligation can be applied to this gnome.

Together with the "sceal" formula, another important notion is that the wolf gnome should be interpreted in the context of Anglo-Saxon popular thought and culture. In this respect, quite interestingly, the wolf gnome is grouped with the hawk and boar gnomes:

. . . .	Hafuc sceal on glofe	
wilde gewunian,	wulf sceal on bearowe,	
earn anhaga,	eofor sceal on holte,	
toðmægenes trum. . . .		(ll. 17b-20a) <sup>3</sup>

[A hawk, wild, must dwell on the falconer's glove. A wolf, wretched solitary dweller, must be in a grove. A boar, strong in his strength of tusks, must be in a wood.]

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3) From *An Anglo-Saxon Reader*. <http://www.sacred-texts.com/neu/ascp/a15.htm>.

These three animals, of course, are closely related to the Anglo-Saxon hunting tradition. Hawking was a favorite sport or pastime for the Anglo-Saxons either in bird-hunting or in game (Strutt 82-97). Wolf and boar belonged to the first class of beasts for hunting (Strutt 75).

Particularly, the hawk gnome provides a very significant clue to why the wolf gnome should be interpreted in the context of Anglo-Saxon popular thought and culture. While we moderns believe that the hawk is "typical" in nature, the contemporary Anglo-Saxons were convinced that the hawk "ought to" be on the [hawking] glove. Thus, it was natural for the Anglo-Saxons that the hawk abided on the glove (or in the Anglo-Saxon household), just as the game beasts, such as wolf and boar, were in the forest. Consequently, it appears that the poet of the gnomes proclaimed that "the hawk, the wild one, ought to remain on the glove," and "the wolf, the wretched solitary being, and the boar, of strong strength of tusk, ought to be in the forest."

Perhaps, the wolf ought to be in the forest because he ought to be hunted in the forest **or** because he, like an outlaw, ought to be secluded from the society. In this regard, the appositive phrase "earn anhaga" is significant. On the one hand, the phrase reveals the characteristics of wolf (particularly, in the battle-scenes) or the symbolic meaning of wolf (i.e. as an outlaw), which were commonly recognized by Anglo-Saxon writers. On the other hand, the phrase explains the meaning of the gnome: because the wolf is too dangerous to be with people, he ought to be in the forest, thus becoming a wretched solitary being. Also, we can consider the phrase merely as a contemporary cliché because such a characteristic feature of the wolf is often found in other OE writings.

The habitation of the wolf in the forest is also an Old English convention, though it is somewhat problematic. Norman E. Eliason observes in his study of

"wulfhlip" (*Beowulf* 1358a) that wolves are traditionally associated with cliffs (22). According to Eliason, the presence of wolves in cliffs was "natural" because "cliffs were commonly used both as places on which to bury, and from which to hurl, animals and human beings" (22). One who agrees with Eliason's view may raise a question why the poet of the *gnome* used "bearowe" instead of "walde"—in other words, why the poet did not use the Old English formulaic phrase "wulf on walde," even breaking the perfect *w*-alliteration.

In fact, *bearu* or *bearo* came from Old High German *baro*, Old Icelandic *bǫr-r* ("tree"), Old Slavic *borŭ* ("pine-tree"), Latin *far* ("spelt, grain, meal"), and Serbian *bŕk* ("summit, peak") (*Altenglisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch*). However, in spite of Serbian *bŕk*, *bearowe* (dative form of *bearo*) seems to signify a "grove or forest" because it is an Old English cliché which appears repeatedly in Old English literary works. *The Angl-Saxon Dictionary* shows many examples:

- 1) Se hálga bearo sette [the holy man planted a grove] (*Genesis* 2840)
- 2) Wæter wynsumu bearo ealne geondfarap [pleasant waters pervade all the grove] (*Phoenix* 67)
- 3) Se fugel of ðæs bearwes beáme gewíteþ [the fowl departs from the tree of the grove] (*Phoenix* 148)
- 4) Heó begeát gréne bearwas [she gained the green groves] (*Genesis* 1480)

*The Angl-Saxon Dictionary* also illustrates many Old English examples that indicate the forest as the traditional habitat of wolves:

- 1) Ðæs se hlanca gefeah wulf in walde [at that rejoiced the gaunt wolf in the wood] (*Judith* 206)

- 2) Ðæt græge deór, wulf on wealde [that grey animal, wolf in the wood]  
(*The Battle of Brnanburh* 64b-65a)
- 3) Fyrdleóð ágól wulf on walde [a wolf sang a war-song in the wood]  
(*Elene* 28)
- 4) Wulf sang áhóf, holtes gehléða [the wolf uplifted his song, the companion of the forest] (*Elene* 112)

Finally, the wolf gnome can be interpreted in the context of God's providence. Thomas D. Hill argues that "the disorder which characterizes the world of experience is still part of God's providential order" (447), employing the Augustinian concept of God's providence that "evil and disorder exist in the world to provide an almost rhetorical contrast to order and good" (446). Based on this view, then, the wolf, though wicked and dangerous, ought to be "only" in the forest because it is God's providence.

To sum up, the literal interpretation of the wolf gnome of *Maxims II* is quite simple either in two ways: "the wolf, wretched solitary being, *is typically* in the forest" or "the wolf, wretched solitary being, *ought to be* in the forest." However, in content, the gnome is not so simple. Because the gnome was composed not for moderns but for Anglo-Saxons, the gnome should be considered in the context of Anglo-Saxon popular thought and culture. In order to interpret the gnome in a precise and proper way, modern readers should recognize the Anglo-Saxon's way of thinking, their culture, and both their pagan and Christian belief in nature and God. "The wolf, wretched solitary being, *is typically* in the forest" is our interpretation; "The wolf, wretched solitary being, *ought to be* in the forest" is their interpretation.

주제어: 늑대, 함축의미, 앵글로-색슨 격언시, “sceal,” 해석

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Abstract

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The sixty-six lines of the *Cotton Maxims (Maxims II)* consist of a series of so-called gnomic verses which are supposed to be "pieces of universally accepted knowledge in the form of versified sentences." In reading of *Maxims II*, however, readers are puzzled over how the whole poem could be understood as a unit, for some of the maxims, including the "wulf" maxim, are not look like "pieces of universally accepted knowledge" to modern ears. The crux of the poem is its ambiguous use of "the reiterated *sceal* or *scyle*," for the whole work of *Maxims II*, "the various items of the *sceal* series," "are exceedingly difficult to connect in any logical or even emotional sequence, although sometimes two or three items do have a demonstrable relationship."

The paper focuses on the interpretation of the "wulf" maxim, expounding the Anglo-Saxon concept of "wulf" and identifying the specific meaning of *sceal* in the context of Anglo-Saxon popular thought and culture. The literal translation of the wolf gnome of *Maxims II* is quite simple either in two ways: "the wolf, wretched solitary being, *is typically* in the forest" or "the wolf, wretched solitary being, *ought to be* in the forest." However, in content, the gnome is not so simple. In order to interpret the gnome in a precise and proper way, modern readers should recognize the Anglo-Saxon's way of thinking, their culture, and both their pagan and Christian belief in nature and God. "The wolf, wretched solitary being, *is typically* in the forest" is our interpretation; "The wolf, wretched solitary being, *ought to be* in the forest" is their interpretation.



The Meaning of the Cotton “Wulf” Maxim in the Context of Anglo-Saxon Popular  
Thought and Culture. 263

Key Words

wolf/wulf, connotation, Anglo-Saxon wolf-gnome, "sceal," interpretation