

Third Stanza



Dorn byþ ðearle scearp ðegna gehwylcum
 Anfengys yfyl ungemetum réþe
 Manna gehwylcum ðe him mid resteð

Translations

(A) Transliteration

(The) {thorn; thorn bush} is {severely, strictly, excessively}
 {sharp, harsh, penetrating}
 (to) {servant, disciple, retainer; freeman; noble; military person,
 warrior, hero} {each, every}
 (Of) {grasping, taking, receiving} evil
 {immeasurably, excessively, immoderately, extremely} {fierce,
 terrible, dreadful}
 (To) man {each, every}
 who them {among; with} {remains; rests; reposes, ceases from
 toil; lies unmoving}

(B)

Prickle plenty sharp • princes, to each is.
 Taking is torture; • totally so cruel for
 Any one person • hanging onto it.

(C)

The thorn is severely sharp to any noble. Thorns are evil to the grasp and
 excessively fierce to any person who remains with them.

(D)

The thorn is extremely harsh to every noble. To the grasp evil,
 excessively grim to every person who stays with it.

Issues in Edition and Translation

“Dorn” presents one issue in edition and one issue in translation. The
 edition issue is a minor matter of whether to leave in a hyphen that
 occurs in Hickeys’ copy. The translation issue significantly affects

interpretation, and revolves around whether the last half line implies “amidst thorns” or to “with a thorn”.

Anfengys

The “original” text says “anfen-gys”, but following Grienberger (1921), most editors regard this as a printer error. (See Appendix B on editing). The word in question is the genitive of “grasp / taking / receiving”. It would have more usually been spelled “anfenges” and is not normally hyphenated in the surviving corpus of Old English.

Plural or Singular Implicit Pronoun Reference

Grammatically, “þorn” has two sentences, as you can see in Translation B. The second has an implicit subject and an implicit conjunction between two major clauses. The implicit conjunction is made explicit in Translation C.

Most translators of “þorn” render the second sentence as if its implicit subject were “thorns”. This view — a consensus of Twentieth Century students of the *OERP* — is represented here by Translation C. That rendering is a sentence-based translation which has “any person” resting among (plural) thorns. Less grammatically correct examples range from Dickens 1915 translation (“...an evil thing for any knight to touch, uncommonly severe on all who sit among them.”) to Pollington’s 1996 translation (“seizing it is bad, excessively severe for any person who lays (sic) among them”). Perhaps Twentieth Century scholars examined uses of *restan* and found that it is very similar to the Modern English “to rest”, emphasizing that the whole body is not in motion. Since it is not possible for the whole body to rest on a thorn, there must be many of them. If there are many thorns, “him” in 3b has to be plural because *mid* means “amidst”.

However, if there is an implicit plural pronoun in verse 2a, this would likely tend to baffle the listener or reader, and it would constitute an abuse of poetic license. Consistent use of the singular throughout the stanza would agree with the pattern in all the other stanzas of this poem and in the stanzas of the *Old Norwegian Rune Rhyme* and the *Old Icelandic Rune Poem*. Also, the dative “him” in Old English can denote Modern English “him”, (þorn is grammatically masculine in Old English) as well as “them”. In this context, *restap* is therefore better rendered as “remains” than as “rests”. This is the point of view taken by Kemble prior to the modern consensus. In his 1840 translation he sees the stanza as one long sentence with its subject as a single þorn. His translation, in part: “bad to take hold of, / immeasurably severe / to every man / that resteth with him.”

Grienberger (1921) agrees that the thorn must be singular throughout the stanza, but he opines that þorn must be a thorn bush because in the last verse the focal person is spoken of as lying amidst one. Grienberger's definition would be contrary to other usages in Old English, where þorn is definitely not a bush. The comedic notion of a person voluntarily lying on a thorn bush has puzzled Teutonic religious reconstructionists for decades.

The resolution is to translate restap as “remains” and mid as “with”, so that verse 3b says “who remains with the thorn” in the sense of sticking with it (pun intended) as opposed to putting the awful thing down.

It happens that you do not get the same metaphoric message from both interpretations of the pronoun reference in this verse 3b. That is either you have to (1) leave many minor troubles, or (2) let go of one thing that is bad for you.

Critique of Translation B

The Old English original is grammatically a little smoother than is Translation B, in both the first and last lines. In the original, the verb follows the subject directly in verse 1a instead of showing up at the end of 1b. Also, the original of 3b is grammatically conventional.

Verse 2b does not have quite the same natural rhythm as the original because “totally so” differs by nuance from ungemetum.

In verse 3b, the rhythm of “onto it” is slightly different from that of “mid restap”. On the other hand, “any one person” would be an excellent rendition of the formula “manna gehwylcum” if the speaker were to put equal emphasis on “any” and “person”. However, it is also necessary to run “one person” together as if it were a hyphenated word.

The alliteration reproduction— including the pattern of chief staves — is perfect. This is more easily achieved than in rhythmic reproduction.

The C and D translations are used in this chapter only in technical discussions of translation and edition issues.

Discussion

At the lowest level of meaning, “Porn” reminds us of our “Aversion to Thorns”.

As the metaphorical level, we are warned that “Attractive Phenomena Can Be Dangerous” and that “Possessing Can Be Painful If Done Poorly”.

At the third level, we are advised that “You Have to Let Go of Things That Drive You Crazy”. Then all the implications of first- and second-level implicit stanzas are applied to philosophy of religion.

Aversion to Thorns

The ðorn of this stanza is unambiguously evil. Touching is bad; grasping is evil; holding on is extremely torturous. This implicit stanza is easily perceived from Translation B.

Banal substantive content at the first level is a clue that each stanza had a beautiful rhythm and melody – perhaps a different music for each structure of stanza (2, 3, 4, or 5-line). That musical aspect of the poem would have allowed even the more philosophically naïve individuals to enjoy performing or listening and to want to preserve the poem. As of this writing, no one has figured out the musical aspect of the OERP as Creed (1990) has done with *Beowulf*.

Attractive Phenomena Can Be Dangerous

Osborn and Longland observe that thorns are a common and nonlethal form of defense. Therefore they infer thorns symbolize common difficulties and obstacles of life (Osborn and Longland, 1982: 20-30, 88). The thorn can also symbolize complications with uncommon phenomena. And these are not just any difficulties or obstacles, but ones that we actively acquire.

Although the strophe does not mention anything that is protected by the thorn, it is a metaphor for something that is a defense of (or problem with) something else. Why else would we touch, grasp, or hold on? The answer is that we have an ambivalence about the phenomena that the prickly guards. Sometimes the attraction is hidden. Thus, person can dwell on complaints about an ex-spouse because of the joy of rage, for certain endogenous body chemicals associated with rage can make one high. Or a person can avoid putting war experiences behind because the person enjoys remembering his youth and a macho image. Alcoholics may like to be high and to have an excuse to not exert self-control. (Of course there are withdrawal symptoms for alcoholics also.)

The examples show that there are phenomena — ranging from minor bad habits to horrible substance addictions — that people often need to be told to let go of. This implicit stanza is a way of phrasing the message

that there are things that are driving a person crazy because he or she is hanging onto them. The indirect nature of the reference to ambivalence is part of the message about it. People are often not aware that they are the reason they have some of the troubles they complain of, and sometimes they actively deny responsibility. Sometimes, if you can make a person figure this out from a stanza for himself or herself, you can have more effect than by just preaching.

Possessing Can Be Painful If Done Poorly

The grasping in question metaphorically represents an attempt to acquire or retain that works out to one's disadvantage because of a technical mistake. Just as one might carelessly attempt to pick a rose or extract water from a cactus, one can fall in love selfishly and hurt oneself with jealousy. One can fall in love competitively, wanting to somehow be better than the other, and get hurt with envy or with alienation of the other. Trying too hard to be impressive or dominant or submissive without spending some effort on understanding the other can bring the touch of a thorn. One can smother offspring with unneeded caring that is offered mainly to maintain possession. One can pursue a business relationship with a hyperexploitative style. Of course, it is only human to love and be a little possessive, demanding, servile, or competitive; there is no business relationship without profitable use. These are matters of degree, but if you are oferhyrned (in terms of "Úr"), then you are likely to find the "Pörn".

The prickle can also be the "catch" that comes with an offered love, a business proposition, or some other item or action. You do not have to reach out very far or be very aggressive, but passively accepting causes pain. A gift of computer software can be like this, as can a drug offered by a friend that causes hangover. If you are on the receiving end of a selfish love, the affection, praise, and attention can have a thorn attached.

You Have to Let Go of Things That Drive You Crazy

In this implicit stanza, the thorn is a symbol for things we can possess or obsess on that have net aversive consequences. The reference to grasping tells us that these are not necessarily things that happen to us but things we can possess. In this aspect, the stanza says that we have to let go of certain things. In concrete terms, we might say: you have to stop dwelling on resentful complaints about your ex-husband; you have to let go of your emotional experiences in Vietnam and put away or discard the souvenirs that symbolize them; you have to give up your addiction to alcohol; etc.

This is a message not just to people who have unusual difficulties, but to all of us. This view of the stanza is evident in Translation B along with “Attractive Phenomena Can Be Dangerous”.

Some Things Are Unambiguously Bad

This implicit stanza is derived from “Aversion to Thorns”.

The idea that the good and bad are intertwined, or that nothing or no one is all good nor all bad, can be found in much religious or philosophical literature. Actually, that notion is contrary to our experiences in daily life. There are (some very few) phenomena which show themselves as entirely awful or joyful. Like the thorn, the all-bad (or all-good) are usually not standalone phenomena, but a reasonable point of view must admit that they exist.

Beware of Bad Religious Scholarship

This topic is emphasized in Appendix F: Mysteries, in the section “Study”. A little skepticism can be helpful to distinguish between *lár* and *leaspeallung*.

Religion Is Beautiful but Can Be Harmful

This implicit stanza is built upon all those at lower levels. Any noble person can find aspects of religion which are best avoided or let go of. A seeker can try to have and want to do well, but approach it badly, like the seekers of human ties in “Possessing Can Be Painful if Done Poorly”.

One can become obsessed with harmful superstitions or with the outer trappings of religion and wander away from its essence. Care and humane standards should be applied. In modern times, we all are aware of crusades, witch hunts, and other unenlightened activities that appear to be religious but are contrary to humane ethics. Involvement in such pseudo-religious movements can hinder the development of a person if not drive him or her a little crazy. However, there are personal-level thorns that are more frequently encountered. Power struggles over church committees, overemphasis on a particular ritual style, spending too much time in meditation or ceremony at the expense of a healthy social life — are examples of thorns growing in the vines of religions. Superstitions, overuse of escapism, and naïve attempts to feel superior to the less enlightened are thorns whose pain is not always apparent. The *OERP* returns to this topic in subsequent stanzas, as in “Lagu” and “Ýr”. The role of insecurities in causing us to grab thorns is a theme of “Cén”.

Themes

Simple Themes

- Careless reaching out.
- Hanging onto that which is harmful
- Aversive phenomena
- Fascinating and attractive aversive phenomena
- Attaining things one does not want
- Holding on despite severe pain
- Unequivocal evil
- The evil that grows on the same vine as the beautiful
- Emotional insecurity
- Unselfish love
- Ethical business

Contrasts

- Attraction versus aversion
- Properly done versus carelessly done acquisition
- Holding on versus letting go
- Enlightened love versus emotionally insecure love
- Fair business versus business that is destructive

Advice for Living

Technical skill, care, and humane standards should be applied to interpersonal relations, hobbies, work, play, and religion. We sometimes forget and treat badly people we need. We can ruin our enjoyment of love by grasping thoughtlessly or ineptly. Attractive things and doings can be dangerous. Sometimes one must be skillful when approaching or retaining, and sometimes people need to be told to just let go. Although there may be some inherent yin-yang, good-bad, aversion-attraction balance in the course of human life, one can encounter aspects of things or events that are purely evil from a noble point of view. Although the overall balance of human lives may be “positive”, anyone will encounter times to just let go. Although it may be difficult to engage the flywheels of one’s conscious mind in the presence of compelling passion, desire must be tempered with discipline. Let go of superstitions that hold you back.