

The Wife's Lament: A Riddle of Her Own

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"Thus each generation of women writers has found itself, in a sense, without a history, forced to rediscover the past anew, forging again and again the consciousness of their sex."

Elaine Showalter
A Literature of Their Own

"Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—"
Emily Dickinson

"Immobilized and half-blinded in Plato's cave, how does [a woman who thinks in images] distinguish what she is from what she sees, her real creative essence from the unreal cutpaper shadows the cavern-master claims as reality?"

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar
The Madwoman in the Attic

The Wife's Lament is one of two female-voiced poems in the Old English corpus. While traditionally categorized as an elegy because of features such as the solitariness of the speaker, a comparison of happier times to present ill-fortune, and themes of banishment and separation, in many respects, the poem does not fit this generic classification. Marilyn Desmond summarizes the critical confusion concerning this poem as follows: "Critics have long sought for, and have failed to achieve, some sort of authoritative closure for these two elegies [*The Wife's Lament* and the other female-voiced poem, *Wulf and Eadwacer*]. Both poems are full of confusing, even troubling, allusions, and both lack a recognizable narrative or logical framework" (588).

Faye Walker-Pelkey takes the position that the poem is such an enigmatic elegy because it is not an elegy at all. She argues that the poem should be reclassified as a riddle, citing as evidence its placement in the *Exeter Book* (after fifty-nine riddles, followed by

seven didactic and homiletic poems, and then more riddles), the gnomic wisdom at the end of the poem (the didactic nature of which suggests a riddle), and substantive and structural parallels that she sees between *The Wife's Lament* and other specific riddles. Walker-Pelkey reads the mysterious fragments of the poem, the multiple meanings of the words, and the ambiguous relationships as clues, commenting that one of the "significant benefits of reading the poem as a riddle is the recognition that a coherent 'explanation' may not only be impossible, but unnecessary" (260).

Unfortunately, Walker-Pelkey proceeds to offer precisely the type of comprehensive explication of the poem that she claimed was unnecessary. She solves the riddle, explaining that all the pieces of the narrative fall into place if we read the *ic* of the poem as a sword (*mece*) that has been buried apart from its *hlaforð*. The most regrettable aspect of this reading is that it erases the female voice. Alluding to critics who have attempted to emend the poem to make the speaker male, Walker-Pelkey asserts that the "difficulty in determining the gender of the speaker reinforces the sense that the speaker is an inanimate object with neither 'maleness' nor 'femaleness' invested in it" (261).

I see the "femaleness" of the speaker as key to any understanding of the poem and therefore reject Walker-Pelkey's "solution." I consider her analysis of the riddle-like nature of the poem, however, to be a particularly fruitful line of inquiry, especially in connection with the femaleness of the speaker. In her article entitled "The Voice of Exile: Feminist Literary History and the Anonymous Anglo-Saxon Elegy," Desmond supports reclamation of *The Wife's Lament* for feminist literary history, arguing that the anonymity of the poem emphasizes the voice of the text, making the gender of the speaker all-important. Focusing on the language of exile (typical of Anglo-Saxon elegies), she presents the poem as an effective vehicle for the female speaker to articulate her marginality and otherness. I strongly concur with Desmond's argument that the female voice alone is sufficient to reclaim this poem for feminist literary history. Emphasizing the riddle-like qualities of the poem, however, I will go a step further and suggest that *The Wife's Lament* actually speaks about female poetic creation.

Critics have suggested a wide array of frameworks and contexts for *The Wife's Lament*. Drawing on the work of Theodor Frings and Leo Spitzer, Kemp Malone characterizes the poem as part of the *Frauenlieder* tradition, arguing that the style and substance of the poem bring it within this "international framework"

of "folk poetry, made up chiefly of songs put in the mouths of women, who gave free utterance to the feelings of their hearts" (106-07). Lois Bragg, on the other hand, finds the evidence linking *The Wife's Lament* to the *Frauenlieder* tradition unconvincing, arguing instead that the poem should be read in the context of later medieval women's love lyrics (258). In this paper, rather than focusing on what *The Wife's Lament* has in common with other poems and traditions, I want to explore the only idea about this poem on which all critics agree (albeit some grudgingly)—that there is something "different" about *The Wife's Lament*.

Shifting critical attention to focus on why this poem may be so different, the following analysis of certain aspects of the poem, specifically the emphatic assertion of the *ic* and her right to speak in the introductory lines, the riddle-like nature of the "plot," and the image of the *eorðscraef*, suggests that *The Wife's Lament* remains elusive within the male-dominated Old English corpus because it is an example of and about female poetic composition, because it is "a riddle of her own."

The woman speaking, the *ic*, is all-important in *The Wife's Lament*. The first word of the poem is *ic*, and it is repeated five times in the first five lines. Barrie Ruth Straus describes this "rare insistence on the assertion of the self and on saying" as follows:

At the beginning of *The Lament*, the speaker asserts her intention to tell her tale: "Ic ðis giædd wrece." By repeating her assertion, "Ic ðæt secgan mæg," she not only asserts but also insists on her authority to do so. And by using the verb *magan*, 'to be able,' rather than the verb *motan*, 'to be allowed,' she emphasizes her capabilities and power to speak. (339)

In her analysis of this poem in terms of J.L. Austin's speech act theory, Straus describes how the use of the first person pronoun, *ic*, combined with the present tense of the verb, *secgan mæg*, constitutes a performative utterance. Performative verbs such as "to tell," Austin explains, "serve the special purpose of *making explicit* (which is not the same as stating or describing) what precise action it is that is being performed by the issuing of the utterance" (61). It is in these opening lines (and only here) that the speaker expressly identifies herself as a woman with the three feminine forms *geomorre*, *minre*, and *sylfre*. With her first utterance, she makes explicit what precise action is being performed—a woman is telling her own story.

While the *ic* emphatically asserts her right to speak, in typical riddle fashion, she does not identify herself. The "clues" she provides are that she is *ful geomorre*, she has always been sad (*sioðan ic up weox*), and that she has never been more sad than now (*no ma ðonne nu*). Moreover, she always has suffered the misery of her exiles. But who is she? Why is she telling this *giedd* (riddle/story/song) *bi me* (about me) and about *minre sylfre sið* (my own journey/my own experience)? While we expect her to clarify who she is in the following "narrative," she, instead, shifts the focus to her *hlaford*. Or does she?

The literary criticism of the poem suggests that the speaker does shift attention away from herself onto some number of men. Scholars have been frustrated for years by the ambiguity of whether there are one, two, or three men in this woman's life. Moreover, it is clear from the title assigned to this poem by the critical tradition that who the woman is lamenting has been deemed as important as the woman herself. It is the wife's lament, not the woman's lament. While it is true that the change in the name of the poem from *The Exile's Lament* (the originally untitled poem being so named in 1842) acknowledges that the speaker is a woman, it also defines her only in terms of her relationship to a man. This critical deflection from the speaker is particularly troubling in light of the clear and powerful introduction that it ignores: "ic ðis giedd wrece bi me ful geomorre minre sylfre sið" (emphasis added).

So why is there this space in the narrative that has permitted a shift away from the *ic*? One might argue that there is no such space. All the *hlaford* does is leave. Critics, not the woman, have made him so important. I would suggest instead, however, that there is a textual space in the poem, but one not intended for the introduction of other characters. Rather, it is a space in which the narrator is seeking a way to define herself.

If the speaker is the woman composing the poem, with its composition being a part of her journey, defining herself may be particularly difficult: "For all literary artists, of course, self-definition necessarily precedes self-assertion: the creative "I AM" cannot be uttered if the "I" knows not what it is. But for the female artist the essential process of self-definition is complicated by all those patriarchal definitions that intervene between herself and herself" (Gilbert 17). Jane Chance, in her study *Woman as Hero in Old English Literature*, describes those patriarchal definitions that would have complicated the self-definition of a woman composing poetry in the Anglo-Saxon period. Chance explains that in Old En-

glish literature, women were typified as either Eve or the Virgin Mary (Eva/Ave):

[T]he primary conventional secular role of Anglo-Saxon woman demanded her passivity and peacemaking talent, an ideal perfectly fulfilled in the social and religious archetype of the Virgin Mary. . . . While there were very many nearly ideal Anglo-Saxon wives and queens who attempted to weave peace but who failed because of external (political) factors, they were not castigated for their failure; only those women who failed because of internal (psychological) factors—and failed by deliberately inverting the passive ideal—were blamed by others or themselves. Frequently, they were identified as lascivious, heathen, rebellious—hence modeled upon Eve. (xiv)

A woman poet, who would be deliberately inverting the passive ideal, may have found it very difficult to utter "*ic eom*," and would have had good reason to be *ful geomorre*. Especially now (*no ma ðonne nu*), when she turns to composing, and comes face to face only with images of what she is not.

Determined, however, this poet sets out *folgæs secan*. The phrase *folgæs secan* has been translated in various ways, with "to seek service" (i.e. to find a new lord) and "to seek protection" being two popular contrasting views. Critics such as Mandel claim that the speaker must be a man because the phrase *folgæs secan* is unfitting for a woman. Belanoff, however, argues that the very inappropriateness of the phrase lends it a particularly effective resonance and "creates meaning in the poem and for the speaker" (197). Focusing on the speaker, I suggest that she is seeking the other meanings of *folgæs*—pursuit, employment, condition of life, destiny. She is seeking to define herself and to make a place for herself within a poetic tradition.

I am not suggesting that the more traditional readings of this poem are "wrong" so much as that they are incomplete. Indeed, I see these various interpretations as integral to the poem's purposeful ambiguity. The poem itself speaks to the craft of the poet; there is no reason to believe that she was incapable of presenting a clear narrative about a lamenting or adulterous woman. Thus, the mysterious fragments of narrative require some explanation. Gilbert and Gubar describe how historically women "have created submerged meanings, meanings hidden within or behind the more ac-

cessible, 'public' content of their works, so that their literature could be read and appreciated. . . . [T]hey may have attempted to transcend their anxiety of authorship by *revising* male genres, using them to record their own dreams and their own stories *in disguise*" (72-3). Emily Dickinson, whose entire life has been characterized as a riddle, describes this process of revision and disguise as "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—" (qtd. in Gilbert 73). My contention that the woman who composed *The Wife's Lament* adopted a similar strategy is supported by Malone's conclusion that this poet was influenced but not bound by the conventions of the time: "As a work of art the poem stands outside the classical tradition, though it owes much to that tradition. And the poet made a little masterpiece" (117).

The "public plot" of the poem is that she is lamenting her exile and separation from a man, most traditionally her husband. I suggest that one of the submerged meanings is that she, as the poet, is lamenting her exile from a male poetic tradition, and her separation from her own self-identity. She describes herself as a "wineleas wræcca for minre weaþearfe" (a friendless exile on account of my sorry plight). Here, she chooses a specifically feminine word for "sorry plight," letting the *minre* echo with the *minre* in line two, emphasizing that she, as the poet, has a particularly female problem. She suffers *uhtceare* wondering where her *leodfruma* may be. The word, *leodfruma*, often translated as "chief" or "prince" is a kenning. "Little riddles" themselves, kennings often involve submerged meanings. Interestingly, *leod* is the gender neutral word, "people," while *fruma*, in addition to meaning "prince," also means "beginning," "origin," "creator," or "inventor." This may be precisely the type of generative source that the female poet would be seeking. With no female poetic tradition, she has "lyt holdra freonda" (few dear friends) and therefore "is min hyge geomor" (my heart is sad).

Not only does she have few or no friends, she has enemies. Someone is plotting secretly against her (maybe her husband's kinsmen or maybe society in general) and she has been commanded (*het*) to stay within certain boundaries. Moreover, the one that seemed "well-suited, companionable" (*gemæcne*) but was contemplating murder or violence (*morsor*) may figure a poetic tradition that condemns women who reject the role of passive peacekeeper. This woman's feelings of loneliness, alienation, and fear are suggestive of what Gilbert and Gubar have called the "phenomena of inferiorization" that mark a particularly female struggle for artistic

definition and expression:

Thus the loneliness of the female artist, her feelings of alienation from male predecessors coupled with her need for sisterly precursors and successors, her urgent sense of her need for a female audience together with her fear of the antagonism of male readers, her culturally conditioned timidity about self-dramatization, her dread of the patriarchal authority of art, her anxiety about the impropriety of female invention—all these phenomena of “inferiorization” mark the woman writer’s struggle for artistic self-definition and differentiate her efforts at self-creation from those of her male counterpart. (50)

The narrator of *The Wife’s Lament* speaks of a *fæhtou* she must suffer, which may be the feud raging within herself as she struggles to understand and overcome the separation of “we two” (*wit, unc*), the separation of herself from herself. To reconcile and redefine herself, however, she must first overcome her fear, timidity, dread, and anxiety. She must embrace the impropriety of female invention, and take on the very “unpassive” role of poetic creator. It is no wonder that at this point, she finds herself in a cave.

Scholars have proposed many interpretations of the *eorðscræf*, the location of the narrator in *The Wife’s Lament*. Most tend to focus on its literal meaning, investigating her physical location, with “cave” being the traditional and most common interpretation. Emily Jensen has suggested, however, that the focus on the literal rather than the figural meaning of the *eorðscræf* has stripped the poem of its most powerful image. She reads the *eorðscræf* as a metaphor for “the speaker’s feelings of loss and isolation from her lover” (452). I agree with Jensen that the *eorðscræf* is a powerful metaphor; however, I read it as a metaphor for the female poet’s struggle. The cave represents the confines of a patriarchal poetic tradition that has defined her and then commanded her to stay within those limits, but the cave also is a place of female power and creativity.

Caves are places of enclosure and confinement, and the woman in *The Wife’s Lament* describes the *eorðscræf* (where she is commanded to go by her *hlaford*) in very claustrophobic terms. It is dark (*dimme*), surrounded by sharp enclosures overgrown with briars (*bitre burgtunas brerum beweaxne*). It is a joyless place (*wic wynna leas*). But a cave also is a source of power for women, “a

cave is—as Freud pointed out—a female place, a womb-shaped enclosure, a house of earth, secret and often sacred” (Gilbert 93). The *eorðscræf* in the poem is not only a “cave,” it is an “earth cave,” the secretness and sacredness of which has been investigated by many critics. Christine Fell comments that “the literate Englishwoman of the ninth or tenth century would have found little historical information in her reading about her female ancestors, and nothing in which she herself might have traced her ancestry back through the female line to some pagan goddess as her male relatives trace theirs back to Woden” (25). Fell, however, does cite evidence of a “Mother Earth” in a charm included in an early eleventh-century manuscript. While partly a Christian prayer, the “charm names ‘Mother Earth,’ *eorðan modor*, asking that God shall grant her fertility, growing crops, barley, the white wheat, and all the fruits of the land in abundance” (27). For a woman seeking to make a place for herself amidst the established myths and images of women in literature, to make sense of the riddle that she has become, the *eorðscræf* earth mother is a natural place to turn for strength (as a powerful female image) and inspiration (as a source of creativity).

It is in the cave that the poet finally is able to express herself. Before she enters the cave, she keeps things inside. Her suffering and longing are internal aches (my heart longed); they are feelings, not expressions. But in the cave, she weeps. She weeps her exile and all her many hardships: “ic wepan mæ mine wræcsiðas, earfoða fela.” In the cave, she can feel deeply and express those feelings. As she “emerges” from the cave (there is a clear shift in the poem at line 42), she speaks with authority. While the meaning of the final section of the poem is much contested, the power of her utterance is widely acknowledged.

Some critics say she is uttering gnomic wisdom, while others suggest she is predicting the future. Many conclude that she is cursing those who have been the cause of her own suffering. Whether she is engaging in one or all of these speech acts (or sending a completely different kind of message), there is undeniable power in her speech. The last line of the poem, “Wa bið ðam ðe sceal of langoðe leofes abidan” (“Woe is it for the one who out of longing must wait for the dear one”), is often read as devoid of any sense of consolation. Desmond suggests that there is no expression of hope because the female speaker experiences an “exile so pervasive, an exile so thoroughly inscribed in her language and in her culture, that her elegiac vision cannot include expressions of

consolation" (588). This may indeed be one of the meanings, possibly one of the key messages of this female speaker. Other clues in this enigmatic final section, however, suggest that there may be another message, one that may offer some hope.

The speaker makes one other particularly gnomic statement in this conclusion: "sy æt him sylfum gelong eal his worulde wyn" ("all a person's joy in the world may be dependent on him or herself"). Reading the last line of the poem in conjunction with this line, it appears that the speaker is offering wisdom, a wisdom based on her own experiences, her own journey in this poem. The hope lies in the fact that she has found a way not only to assert the *ic*, but also to speak about the self. These lines might be translated, "Look to yourself (seek yourself, find yourself, define yourself); woe comes to those who only look to others (for acceptance, for approval, for identity)."

Desmond comments that literary history, "[e]ssentially based on a masculine ideology that usually presents itself as neutral . . . has generally excluded, minimized, or appropriated the roles of women in language—as subjects, authors, voices, or characters" (575). Two centuries of literary criticism of *The Wife's Lament* have enacted precisely the exclusion, minimization, and appropriation that the female-voiced speaker of the poem is lamenting. Gradually, however, this is changing. After years of debate, it is now the general consensus that the gender of the speaker is a woman. Moreover, recent scholarship has rescued her from her traditional interpretation as a "typical" passive woman who "merely sits and weeps." Her voice has been revitalized and the power of her speech acknowledged. It is now time to listen to what she has to say about female poetic creation. In many respects, the poem remains a riddle, a riddle of the speaker's own—but she is still speaking.

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Notes

¹ For a discussion of the generic features of Old English elegies, see Greenfield and Calder 280-302.

² Editors and critics who have ascribed to the position that the speaker is male include Bambas, Stevens, and, most recently, Mandel. See Angela Lucas and Mitchell for confirmation of the traditional and much more widely accepted position that the speaker is female.

³ In 1949, Frings suggested that underlying medieval courtly love poetry was a body of popular "women's songs" (*Frauenlieder*), examples of which could be found in French and Provençal poetry, as well as Portuguese, Serbian, Russian, Greek, and Chinese literature. Spitzer, in 1952, provided the earlier example of the Mozarabic lyric. Malone suggests that *The Wife's Lament* and *Wulf and Eadwacer*, recorded in a tenth-century manuscript, are yet earlier examples of *Frauenlieder*. While most *Frauenlieder* are attributed to male authors, Klinck and Schibanoff discuss a tendency to consider the possibility of female composition. Schibanoff, however, warns against the dangers posed by critical analyses that suggest female authorship because the poems express "women's interest" or womanly feelings. She concludes that feminists may be better off looking for real women's songs outside the *Frauenlieder* tradition which, she argues, seems to "represent male fantasy about female romantic fantasy" (192).

⁴ Other proposed contexts for the poem include the comitatus and Christian traditions, as well as the "literary tradition of suffering women" (Renoir 238). For summaries and analyses of several of these interpretations, see Lench and Plummer.

⁵ See Austin for more information about speech act theory generally and performative utterances specifically.

⁶ See Wentersdorf 357.

⁷ Gilbert and Gubar's landmark study of women's literary tradition in *The Madwoman in the Attic* focuses on nineteenth-century writers. The isolation, alienation, and anxieties they describe as

suffered by women trying to create within an almost exclusively male poetic/literary tradition, however, would have been felt, if anything, more acutely by a woman composing much earlier, with even fewer foremothers.

⁸ While important work has been done in recuperating the work of early women writers, it remains the case that literature was primarily a male milieu, full of images of women composed by men. Spitzer, for example, describes how the male poets of "women's songs" were able to "achieve a vicarious pleasure: that of hearing their own conception of woman (as a passionate being who voices only her own uninhibited desire) echoed by the women who sing the stanzas composed for them" (22). For a critical study of women writers from the beginning of the third century to the end of the thirteenth, see Dronke, *Women Writers*.

⁹ See Dolores Lucas for a discussion of Emily Dickinson and her work in the context of riddles.

¹⁰ Belanoff analyzes the poem in terms of Julia Kristeva's theories of language. Highlighting the polysemous quality of the many disputed words and phrases, Belanoff describes how this "piling up of possibilities taps a semiotic response in listeners and allows us to ingest multiple meanings simultaneously" (197).

¹¹ While we know of no parallel Anglo-Saxon laws restricting women's writing, in 789 Charlemagne issued a capitulary forbidding nuns from composing *winileodas*, songs for a friend or lover. *The Wife's Lament* and *Wulf and Eadwacer* are sometimes cited as examples of what these forbidden *winileodas* may have been like. See Klinck 20 and Dronke, *Medieval Lyric* 91.

¹² For a detailed discussion of the possibilities of where the narrator may be located, see Wentersdorf 357-92.

¹³ Wentersdorf analyzes both the secret and sacred (possibly in the sense of a pagan sanctuary) aspects of the cave in *The Wife's Lament*, see 357-92.

¹⁴ Jensen describes a clear sense of movement into and out of the *eorðscræf* (in a figural sense), specifically tracing a narrowing of the imagery in the poem from images suggesting movement (*sið*,

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ofer yða gelac) and *scope* (*gewidost in woruldrice*) to an ever-increasing confinement (*on ðissum londstede; on wuda bearwe; under actreo*), culminating “in that marvelously balanced, holding line—*Eald is ðes eorðsele, eal ic eom of longad*—[where] we pause with the speaker to experience the intensity of the metaphor that has been prepared from the outset” (453). She then describes a shift in the speaker’s perspective and shows how she “is able to move out from that confined space, first to her immediate surroundings, then to other lovers, and finally to her own lover” (454).

¹⁵ For a discussion of the narrator’s speech as action, see Straus 335-56.

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