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# THE WIFE'S LAMENT: A POEM OF THE LIVING DEAD



*Elinor Lench*

## *The Wife's Lament*

- Ic þis giedd wrece      bi me ful geomorre,  
minre sylfre sið.      Ic þæt secgan mæg,  
hwæt ic yrmþa gebad,      siþþan ic up weox,  
niwes oþþe ealdes,      no ma þonne nu.
- 5 A ic wite wonn      minra wræcsiþa.  
Ærest min hlaford gewat      heonan of leodum  
ofer yþa gelac;      hæfde ic uhtceare  
hwær min leodfruma      londes wære.  
Ða ic me feran gewat      folgað secan,
- 10 wineleas wræcca,      for minre weapearfe.  
Ongunnon þæt þæs monnes      magas hycgan  
þurh dyrne geþoht,      þæt hy todælden unc,  
þæt wit gewidost      in woruldrice  
lifdon laðlicost,      ond mec longade.
- 15 Het mec hlaford min      herheard niman,  
ahte ic leofra lyt      on þissum londstede,  
holdra freonda.      Forþon is min hyge geomor,  
ða ic me ful gemæcne      monnan funde,  
heardsæligne,      hygegeomorne,
- 20 mod miþendne,      morþor hycgendne.  
Bliþe gebæro      ful oft wit beotedan  
þæt unc ne gedælde      nemne deað ana  
owiht elles;      eft is þæt onhworfen,  
is nu \* \* \* swa hit no wære
- 25 freondscipe uncer.      Sceal ic feor ge neah  
mines felaleofan      fæhðu dreogan.  
Heht mec mon wunian      on wuda bearwe,  
under actreo      in þam eorðscræfe.  
Eald is þes eorðsele,      eal ic eom oflongad,

- 30 sindon dena dimme,      duna uphea,  
 bitre burgtunas,      brerum beweaxne,  
 wic wylna leas.      Ful oft mec her wraþe begeat  
 fromsiþ frean.      Frynd sind on eorþan,  
 leofe lifgende,      leger weardiað,
- 35 þonne ic on uhtan      ana gonge  
 under actreo      geond þas eorðscrafu.  
 Ðær ic sittan mot      sumorlangne dæg,  
 þær ic wepan mæg      mine wræcsipas,  
 earfoþa fela;      forþon ic æfre ne mæg
- 40 þære modceare      minre gerestan,  
 ne ealles þæs longapes      þe mec on þissum life begeat.  
     A scyle geong mon      wesan geomormod,  
 heard heortan geþoht,      swylce habban sceal  
 bliþe gebæro,      eac þon breostceare,
- 45 sinsorgna gedreag,      sy æt him sylfum gelong  
 eal his worulde wyn,      sy ful wide fah  
 feorres folclondes,      þæt min freond siteð  
 under stanhliþe      storme behrimed,  
 wine werigmod,      wætre beflowen
- 50 on dreorsele.      Dreogeð se min wine  
 micle modceare;      he gemon to oft  
 wynlicran wic.      Wa bið þam þe sceal  
 of langoþe      leofes abidan.<sup>1</sup>

To offer still another view of *The Wife's Lament*, when current literature already gives a choice of five different interpretations,<sup>2</sup> and past literature gives still more,<sup>3</sup> may seem somewhat unnecessary. But it may be serviceable to dispel some ideas that have clouded discussion of the poem; and there may be justification for an interpretation which, though it is quite new in itself, still

<sup>1</sup> George Philip Krapp and Elliot Van Kirk Dobbie, eds., *The Exeter Book* (New York, 1961), pp. 210-211.

<sup>2</sup> Rudolph C. Bambas, "Another View of the Old English 'Wife's Lament'," *JEGP*, LXII (April, 1963), 303-309. Thomas M. Davis, "Another View of 'The Wife's Lament,'" *PELL*, I (Autumn, 1965), 291-305. Stanley B. Greenfield, "The Wife's Lament Reconsidered," *PMLA*, LXVII (1953), 907-912. A. N. Doane, "Heathen Form and Christian Function in 'The Wife's Lament,'" *Med Stud*, XXVII (1966), 77-91. M. J. Swanton, "The Wife's Lament and The Husband's Message: A Reconsideration," *Anglia*, LXXXII (1964), 269-290.

<sup>3</sup> Two excellent summaries of past scholarship are: Roy F. Leslie, ed., "Introduction," *Three Old English Elegies* (Manchester, 1961), pp. 3-10; Krapp and Dobbie, *op. cit.*, "Notes," pp. 352-353.

reconciles what seems best in the otherwise discordant interpretations which have been advanced until now.

Let us begin by examining the conclusions reached in the five major current interpretations of the poem. Rudolph C. Bambas' interpretation postulates that the "wife" is no wife at all — that "she" is, in fact, a thane who is lamenting, in the traditional elegiac mood, the loss of his lord and *comitatus*. Unfortunately, in order to support his theory, which has the virtue of accounting for the curious anomalies of the lady's *sið* ('fate'), Bambas is forced to practice the art of emendation: he proposes to change the feminine inflections of *geomorre* ('sorrowfulness'), *minre* ('of my'), and *sylfre* ('own') to fit a masculine speaker. Concerning this suggested change, Thomas M. Davis, the second critic whose comments we will consider, says: "Bambas has supplied his own rebuttal in his own words: to suppose that a 'scribe inadvertently added feminine inflections to three successive words in the text' is to strain critical toleration more than it can bear."<sup>4</sup>

Davis conveniently gives his own summary of his view of the events of the poem :

. . . (1) after their marriage, the husband has become involved in a blood-feud, but before he leaves, he provides a dwelling for his wife; (2) the wife attempts to obtain protection from his relatives (*folgað secan*) and they refuse her ; (3) the kinsmen of the slain man plot to exact vengeance on the wife and she is also forced into exile; (4) in the place of her exile the wife has been ordered by some unidentified person to live in the oak-grove.<sup>5</sup>

To support this theory, however, he is forced to introduce into the poem two extraneous, textually unsupported elements: a murder victim and a suspicion that the wife is a sorceress.<sup>6</sup> This sort of critical practice, no less than random emendation, would seem methodologically unjustifiable. Another weakness is evident in his interpretation of the third, concluding section of the poem. Davis takes the conclusion to be merely gnomic wisdom, in which "the wife's emotional outcry is tempered by her acceptance of the

<sup>4</sup> Davis, p. 295.

<sup>5</sup> Davis, p. 302.

<sup>6</sup> Davis, p. 303.

harshness of life."<sup>7</sup> Such a position ignores the prevailing optative mood of lines 42-47a, with its strong implication that the speaker wishes to curse the *geong mon* ('young man') — a grammatical fact upon which Stanley B. Greenfield bases his variant argument.

Greenfield expresses agreement with earlier critics who regarded the final section as a curse, but parts company with them in their conclusion that the object of the curse is the person responsible for the separation of husband and wife.<sup>8</sup> (This "third party" theory, held by Roeder and Gordon,<sup>9</sup> singles out one of the *magas*, the kinsmen of line 11, as responsible for the wife's confinement in the *eorðscræfe*, 'earth-pit,' and thus a suitable candidate for her curse.) Instead, Greenfield suggests that the curse is aimed at the husband by whose command she has been imprisoned; in doing so, he fully accounts for the pejorative description of the husband which she gives in lines 19-20. He explains her more frequent use of affectionate terms (*min leodfruma*, 'my people's prince,' *me ful gemæcne monnan*, 'my perfectly matched man,' *mines felaleofan*, 'my best beloved,' *min freond*, *min wine*, 'my friend') by concluding that the final passage is not a real curse, but merely the expression of the wife's all too human desire that her husband share her hard lot, and thus realize the extent of his cruelty to her.

Plausible as Greenfield's interpretation of the poem is, it appears to have two basic weaknesses. First, it ignores the pattern of diction involving heinous crime (*laðlicost*, 'most hateful,' *morþor*, 'violent crime,' *fæhðu*, 'blood-feud,' *fah feorres folclondes*, 'outlawed throughout civilized lands') which Davis' theory of a feud so neatly accounted for. Second, it notices nothing extraordinary in an Anglo-Saxon *hlaford's* wife being imprisoned in a remote cave (or ruined temple, as some critics suggest<sup>10</sup>) and, seemingly,

<sup>7</sup> Davis, p. 303.

<sup>8</sup> Greenfield, p. 907.

<sup>9</sup> Fritz Roeder, "Die Familie bei den Angelsachsen," *Studien zur englischen Philologie*, No. 4 (Halle, 1899), pp. 113 ff. R. K. Gordon, *Anglo-Saxon Poetry* (London, 1964), pp. 79-80.

<sup>10</sup> In addition to Davis (p. 303) and Doane (pp. 87-88), other critics who have been persuaded by the *actreo* and the emended word *herheard* to view the wife's dwelling as a ruined heathen shrine are: N. Kershaw, *Anglo-Saxon and Norse Poems* (London, 1922), p. 174; Richard Wülker, *Grundriss zur Geschichte der*

living on air. It is this anomalous situation, as well as the strangeness of a lord's wife going out in his absence to seek the protection of strangers (line 9), which evokes Bambas', Doane's, and Swanton's rejection of any interpretation which would make the poem a dramatic monologue with a woman as speaker.

Bambas, as we have seen, would solve the problem by drastic emendation. A. N. Doane has a rather more valid approach — formal analysis of the poem's structure, semantics, and genre. Such an approach leads him to the following view of the poem:

The *WL* is a tripartite poem consisting of an introduction, a mood-spell and a gnome which comprise a formal curse. The poem's tone is one of sustained sadness in an intensely felt present which is concretized and meant to be transferred by a spell to a "geong mon." The curse is spoken by a female being, concerned in some obscure misfortune with a man whom she looks upon as a superior, a patriarch and yet an equal, though not a lover. She is connected somehow with a heathen burial place, enduring an exile painful to her but not clearly delineated to us. These circumstances are the facts of the poem as I read it, and it brings us to the point where bald speculation must begin . . . . The poem, I think, is a literary curse conceived as made by a cast-off heathen minor deity, or attendant household spirit, one of those innumerable female spirits which came to be called in Norse tradition the *disir*. She is lamenting the recent conversion of some priest-chief whom she considered her special "man" . . . . This view explains the "fæhðu" of the man as a kind of interdiction or formal exorcism practiced upon her, perhaps the breaking of her altar, certainly the loss of offerings. Not the least of the results of this approach is the natural and immediate identification of the "geong mon." The curser is attempting to bring down on his head a fate identical to her own, so that he too may be "ful wide fah" (46b) to match her own "fæhðu" — and it follows that a spirit would conceive this possible only of another spirit. The young man must be the god who won away the "goði" — Christ.<sup>11</sup>

Such an interpretation obviously accounts for the two features of the poem which have proved most troublesome: the strange exile and the syntax of the conclusion. Unfortunately, this is

*angelsächsischen Literatur* (Leipzig, 1885), p. 226; and Kemp Malone, "Two English Frauenlieder," *Comparative Literature*, XIV (Winter, 1962), 114-115.

<sup>11</sup> Doane, pp. 88-89.

achieved at the cost of ignoring a good deal of the rest of the poem. Doane would dismiss the clearly time-structured initial twenty-six lines of the poem as "only a sequence of parallel statements very general in meaning," which are "certainly not chronological or logical in . . . effect."<sup>12</sup> In a poem of only fifty-three lines, I cannot but feel that an approach which would write off half the poem is a trifle too cavalier. Furthermore, it is precisely within these lines that the humanity of the speaker is clearly established: it is inconceivable that a goddess 'grew up' (line 3b), or that she would speak of her 'exile's life' as having 'always' been torment to her (line 5), or that she would experience the human emotion of *uhtceare*, 'dawn-care,' on her lord's departure (lines 7b-8). As to the difficulty Doane finds in a woman regarding her husband as "a superior, a patriarch and yet an equal,"<sup>13</sup> I am unable to find it a problem; indeed, such a description would do very nicely as a legal definition of the proper relationship of wife and husband in medieval Germanic society.<sup>14</sup>

M. J. Swanton also posits a non-human speaker as a solution to the poem's difficulties. His suggestions are ingenious and interesting, they are sound in method and, provided one accepts his frame of reference, they are logical. To summarize his very long article is difficult if one is not to do violence to his carefully developed argument. Perhaps the clearest way is to present the points he makes, in the sequence in which he makes them, indicating sketchily the sort of evidence with which he supports his premises.

1. He rejects the notion that *The Wife's Lament* is a realistic, situational, dramatic monologue, on the grounds that (a) ". . . no realistic critic has hitherto been able . . . to present a satisfactory interpretation resolving each of the internal anomalies"<sup>15</sup>; (b) the dramatic monologue is the product of a "totally disparate ethos" whose "astringently realistic and communicative tone" has "no place for the bluntly repetitive emphasis

<sup>12</sup> Doane, p. 78.

<sup>13</sup> Doane, p. 88.

<sup>14</sup> Leslie, p. 5.

<sup>15</sup> Swanton, p. 270.

on a small number of aspects central to the theme that we find in these . . . Old English lyrics"<sup>16</sup>; (c) the absence of identifying proper names, in a poem of a culture fond of allusions, indicates that it is not a portion of an unidentified *Heldensage*; (d) the yearnings of unfulfilled love as a poetic theme is "alien to the Germanic mind, anciently holding marriage to be a practical matter removed from the emotional and egocentric attitudes of Latin poetry."<sup>17</sup>

2. He suggests that the possible key to the poem "may consist in some notion, possibly of a religious nature, familiar to the Anglian eighth century. . . ."<sup>18</sup> He cites *Guplac*, poetry of the Cynewulfian school, and certain homilies and lives of saints by Aelfric and Bede, as evidence that the concepts of the Church as the Heavenly Bride of Christ, and of the exile's wanderings as the Journey through Life and Death, were familiar to the intended audience.
3. He notes that the contents of the *Exeter Book*, in which the poem appears, are primarily short religious fragments.
4. He notes the journey motif in *The Wife's Lament*, and the fact that the husband has gone before her.
5. He places considerable emphasis on the fact that the wife's place of confinement is "reminiscent of the *ubi sunt* formula used in . . . *Blickling Homily XI*, or by Bede, to describe the last age of the world before the Day of Judgement."<sup>19</sup>
6. He notes that both the expressions of longing and the wife's terms of address to her lord are appropriate to religious or spiritual statements.
7. He suggests that the *morþor* of line 20 is not a crime, but rather "any kind of violent death."<sup>20</sup> Hence, he reasons that:

<sup>16</sup> Swanton, pp. 269-270.

<sup>17</sup> Swanton, p. 271. The difficulty of determining the structure and contents of that mysterious entity, "the Germanic mind," aside, Mr. Swanton's suggestion that romantic love was an alien matter to the audience of the poem is patently inadequate, since he also wishes us to believe that such a yearning is being used in this poem as a metaphor for religious longing. Metaphors, after all, are only valid if concrete human experience underlies them.

<sup>18</sup> Swanton, p. 274.

<sup>19</sup> Swanton, p. 279.

<sup>20</sup> Swanton, p. 282.



... the Christ of the Gospels (cf. *ful gemæcne monnan*) while journeying to His predestined end (*heard-sæligne*), could contemplate His own death and departure from the people (*hyggeomorne*) and nevertheless be joyful (*mod miþendne, bliþe gebæro*). Only in the figure of Christ can these paradoxical qualities be suitably resolved.<sup>21</sup>

8. He interprets the last section as gnomic wisdom, addressed to any listener, advising him to endure patiently the hardships of the Last Days, although he also allows that it "may contain some oblique allusion to a person similarly separated from his Lord by purgatory."<sup>22</sup>
9. He concludes with a summary of his thesis: that the poem is an expression of yearning for the reestablishment of the union between Christ and the Church, in a world whose last age presents only images of desolation and decay; and that *The Wife's Lament* can only be understood "like *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*, in terms of traditional Christian symbolism."<sup>23</sup>

One problem with Swanton's argument is that it relies so much on proof of one moot point by another — for example, his assertion that *The Wife's Lament* is "religious by association" because of its inclusion in *The Exeter Book*. One wonders if the "short religious fragments" Swanton has in mind include *Wulf and Eadwacer*, *Deor*, *The Ruin*, and the riddles, which comprise a good portion of *The Exeter Book*, and which only the most extravagant pan-allegorist would deem religious."<sup>24</sup> Another instance of this sort of dubious proof is Swanton's assumption that *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer* are indisputably Christian allegories,<sup>25</sup> or that the hardship and

<sup>21</sup> Swanton, p. 282.

<sup>22</sup> Swanton, p. 281.

<sup>23</sup> Swanton, p. 290.

<sup>24</sup> The Robertsonian claim that all medieval literature is concealed homily is, I believe, insufficiently substantiated.

<sup>25</sup> A summary of past critical controversy on these two poems may be found in Krapp and Dobbie, "Notes," pp. 288-290, 295-298. More recent scholarship is reviewed in J. C. Pope's "Dramatic Voices in *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*," *Franciplegius: Medieval and Linguistic Studies in Honor of Francis P. Magoun, Jr.* (New York, 1965), pp. 164-193.

grimness of the natural world are poetically contrasted by the *scop* only with the beauty and comfort of the Kingdom of Heaven. It needs only slight acquaintance with Anglo-Saxon literature to observe that such images of natural desolation are far more often compared to the joys of the *comitatus* and the fellowship of the mead hall.

But the major weakness of Swanton's thesis, I believe, lies not so much in these overly sweeping generalities (which, by *reductio ad absurdum*, could transform any poem of exile and longing into a pot of message) as in his failure to account adequately for certain facts of the poem's diction and grammar. First, let me make my working assumptions clear: (1) in any poem worthy of critical consideration, words, connotations, and grammatical constructions do not occur by chance, but are included through the process of artistic selection; (2) the critic who would seek to impose unity from evidence outside the poem should be very sure that the evidence of the poem itself will support, or at least not be in active conflict with, the external unity he is imposing.

No such happy concurrence of internal evidence and external unity characterizes Swanton's interpretation. Three uncomfortable facts stand in the way, the same facts that proved embarrassments to the other critics whose work we have discussed. The first is the qualities imputed to the lord and his kinsmen by lines 12 and 19-20, which can only be interpreted as favorable by a selection from the range of possible meanings which strains credibility. The second embarrassment is provided by the many words which connote crime — particularly the crime of murder and a consequent blood-feud. Swanton explains away each word individually, but he fails to come to grips with the pattern they make within the poem. It is difficult to imagine that a poet of any sensitivity or skill would choose to employ *morþor* (which has in general the meaning 'crime of violence' and which is often used explicitly as 'murder'<sup>26</sup>) and *fæhðu* (the state of feud arising from violent death, which must be avenged by death or the payment of were-gild<sup>27</sup>) in an attempt to

<sup>26</sup> Joseph Bosworth and T. Northcote Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* (Oxford, 1929), hereafter referred to as Bosworth-Toller.

<sup>27</sup> Bosworth-Toller.

suggest Christ to his audience. The third fact which refuses to fit itself conveniently into a Christological interpretation is the optative mood of the conclusion of the poem and the consequent grammatical implication of a curse. And over and beyond these three, the concluding lines, *Wa bið þam þe sceal/ of langope/ leofes abidan*, ('Woe be to him who is doomed in longing for love to wait') are a strange ending for a poet anxious to deliver a Christian message.

Ideally, any explication of *The Wife's Lament* should account for the facts of the poem, without resort to emendation, or to the choice of rare and strange meanings for common words — a practice which itself is a variety of emendation. It should also not include supposititious situations — third parties, second husbands, or unknown *Heldensagen*. The critical position now held in highest respect depends upon just such a supposition, or suppositions, however, for it assumes that the speaker was ordered by her husband, or some other person, to take her unlikely residence. Even if one assumes, as Greenfield does, that the husband is responsible for her exile, the strangeness of the wife's residence forces the invention of reasons for this extraordinary mode of handling domestic difficulties. Certainly, there might have been a peculiar set of circumstances, familiar to the poet and his audience, but unknown to us, which accounted fully for the wife's bizarre confinement. The explication that will be offered in the following pages, however, will attempt to meet the demands of the poem without assuming the necessity of such knowledge. Rather, it will assume that the dramatic monologue was not dependent upon the nineteenth century for its existence, and that the poet was using a rather sophisticated poetic device, albeit one readily comprehensible to his audience through the common, habitual, and usual connotations of the diction he was employing.

It seems likely, as Davis suggests, that behind the poem there lies a murder, and that the wife is suffering the consequences of this crime; yet her suffering need not have been imposed either by the kinsmen or by some person or persons unknown. Greenfield's suggestion also seems probable: that the poem ends with a curse, not gnomic wisdom, that the object of the curse is the husband,

that the wife's hostility throughout the poem is directed at the husband, and that she desires that he share her fate. So far, then, we have been in the sweetness and light of agreement with authority. Let us begin to move toward a new interpretation by proposing a modification that might at first be thought minor. Let us suppose that the wife desires more than an empathic realization of her husband's cruelty — vengeance, perhaps. And then let us examine the possibility that the curse is not half-hearted but is, as Doane suggests, a spell designed to conjure the wife's own misery upon the one responsible for it. To do this, we shall need to consider a circumstance in which the wife's feelings would not be ambivalent, and in which the longings so intensely and repeatedly expressed throughout the poem would not be for a reunion in marriage. This will be the line of development in the rest of the article; and it will have the happy result that just as we have been able to accept the best ideas of Davis, Greenfield, and Doane, so too we shall be able to accept Swanton's attractive suggestion that the wife's longings are spiritual rather than sexual in nature — though the context we shall supply will be different.

Here, then, is an outline of the events of the poem as we think they should be viewed. The speaker identifies the poem as the tale of her utterly sorrowful *sið* — a word which can as readily mean 'fate,' or 'lot,' as it can 'journey.' She says that she alone may speak of her unfortunate life, of hardships and misfortunes, new or old, 'never more than now.' First, she says, her lord went on a journey over the sea, and while he was gone, she tormented herself with worry over his whereabouts. Consequently, she too departed, following in order to seek him out. Although, she explains, it was her 'woe-need' which impelled her to follow him, such behavior was irregular enough to cause the *dyrne gepoht* ('secret, evil thought') of his kinsmen. The highly suggestive word, *dyrne*, in the context of the wife's behavior and her subsequent fate, might indicate that the kinsmen, plotting to separate husband and wife, made an accusation of adultery against her on her husband's return.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>28</sup> The connotations of *dyrne* are clearly (indeed, overpoweringly) negative. An examination of the entries in Bosworth-Toller reveals that even in its relatively neutral meaning, 'secret,' 'obscure,' *dyrne* was a pejorative word, applied

Husband and wife live for a short time in 'the most hateful way,' until her lord commands her to take 'this hard place.' This is the cause of her sorrow: that her chosen mate, her perfect match (*ful gemæcne monnan*), was not only that but also *heardsæligne, hygegeomorne, mod miþendne, morþor hycgendne* — 'unfortunate, gloomy-spirited, dissembling of heart, intent upon crime.' She recalls past days, when they joyously exchanged vows of a union which only death could sever. Afterward (presumably after the success of his kinsmen's plots), the joyful union which prompted such boasting was changed; it is now as though their marriage had never existed. She must endure the greatest possible torment — a state of blood-feud between her and the one she loved most, her husband.

At this point, I should like to interrupt the narration to suggest that one possible event which could create a blood-feud between husband and wife is the murder of one by the other. *Fæhðu*, vendetta, could not exist within kinship; but in Anglo-Saxon law, husband and wife were not kin.<sup>29</sup> Nothing in the poem suggests that the husband has been murdered, but what of the wife? Her 'hard place' (*herheard*), and that *on þissum londstede*, 'in this country,' she had (*ahte*, a significant preterite) 'no dear ones, no dear friends,' (*leofra lyt, holdra freonda*) and hence no protectors except her lord and his kin, at least do not contradict such an assumption.

To continue: the wife says that she was commanded to 'remain' (*wunian*), not 'live,' in a grove of trees, under an oak, in the earth-pit (*in þam eorðscræfe*). It is an old 'earth-hall' (*eorðsele*), she is totally overcome with longing in it, its depths are dark, its cliffs are high, it is surrounded by a grim enclosure, it is overgrown with

habitually to matters best kept dark — malice, envy, sinful deeds. Its second meaning, 'dark,' 'deceitful,' 'evil,' plainly stems from the first, and no doubt led to its use in the compounds which meant adultery, *dyrne-geliger* and *dyrnlicgan*. Presumably, it was this penumbra about the *dyrne gepoht* of the kinsmen which led Richard Wülker to the conclusion that "... die Feinde der Frau entweder sie der Untreue beschuldigten oder der Zauberei (d. h. dass sie durch unerlaubte Mittel sich die Liebe ihres Mann verschafft hätte)." *Op. cit.*, fn. 10, p. 226.

<sup>29</sup> Frederic Seebohm, *Tribal Customs in Anglo-Saxon Law* (London, 1902), p. 32.

brambles. The imagery is most appropriate, not to any ordinary cave or hut, but to a grave. She says that she is *ful oft* tormented here by the absence of her lord, and that while there are friends on earth, living beloved, resting easily in their beds at night, she goes alone at dawn, under the oak, only as far as *þas eorðscrafu* — 'these graves.' There she is compelled to remain throughout the 'longest of days' (*sumorlangne dæg*), there she can mourn her exile's fate, her many woes, because she can never gain rest from her suffering, from all the longings that befell her (*begeat*, another suggestive preterite) in this life.

If one tries to interpret the poem as the lament of a living woman, it is difficult to fit her situation into the Teutonic social structure, since imprisonment (as distinguished from exile or outlawry) was not a part of the culture — and imprisonment is clearly what she is undergoing.<sup>30</sup> Adultery, however, was punishable by death; for faults less grave, women were usually returned to their kin<sup>31</sup> — a situation which is clearly not the case in this poem, as the wife's statements about her lack of dear ones indicate. If, as Davis suggests, her tribulations result from her husband's outlawry and the consequent refusal of his kin to maintain her, she would also be returned to her kin, since as a woman, she had no *mund*, no legal responsibility; women from birth to death were unfree and were hence perpetually under the protection of male relatives.<sup>32</sup>

But if, as I propose, one assumes that the accusations of the kinsmen have borne fruit, and that the husband has ordered her killed, what has happened to her is, in terms of the culture, ordinary, not extraordinary. And it is a proposal that also permits far more natural readings of the *ipsissima verba* of the poem than has been possible with other interpretations. Reading *eorðscræfe* as literal 'earthgrave'<sup>33</sup> rather than as an expression of extravagant hyper-

<sup>30</sup> Cf. lines 27, 35, 37 of *WL* with the kind of exile described in *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*.

<sup>31</sup> Sharon Turner, *The History of the Anglo-Saxons from the Earliest Period to the Norman Conquest* (Philadelphia, 1841), p. 147. John Thrupp, *The Anglo-Saxon Home* (London, 1862), pp. 26, 51, 318-319.

<sup>32</sup> Thrupp, p. 51.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. *eorð-scræfe* as it is used in line 84 of *The Wanderer*, in which a grave is clearly meant.

bolic contempt for the dwelling, is economical, in that it provides answers to other puzzling questions. How is the lady managing to stay alive in this totally desolate place? She says she is confined there — that she may go alone throughout, or ‘as far as’ *þas eorðscrafu*, ‘these graves’; who prevents her from leaving, who provides her with food, why is she being maintained here? If she is alive, there are no answers which do not require the assumption of some extraordinary situation. But if she is dead, a ghost, no such assumption is necessary. She may not leave because ‘these graves’ are her natural habitat; she may not join ‘the friends living on earth’ because she is not, as they are, living. The expression which is figurative for them, *leger weardiað*, ‘occupy the grave,’ is literal for her.<sup>34</sup> She may not gain rest from her sufferings, her longings, because she was wrongfully killed; she is an earth-bound spirit, the victim of an unavenged murder.

Thus, the expressions of yearning for her lord’s presence, seen in the light of this reading, are irony of the bitterest sort; so too are the “affectionate” and lofty terms of address to her husband. Two examples of the Anglo-Saxon penchant for this sort of irony are Wealhþeow’s comments on the loving care Hroþulf will provide for her children,<sup>35</sup> and the “tribute” Byrhtnoþ offers the Danes in *Maldon*.<sup>36</sup>

The concluding section would then follow logically from what has gone before. The speaker has concluded her tale of the wrongs her husband has done her, and now invokes his punishment: may he be sorrowful, may he suffer harsh and bitter thoughts, and yet be compelled to mask with a blithe exterior his perpetual heartsickness and sorrow. She wishes him dependent upon himself alone for all joy (hardly likely in a state of *sinsorgna*, ‘perpetual sorrow,’ hence an ironic wish), she hopes he may be outlawed in all governed lands, and dwell ‘under a stone cliff, crusted with ice, a sad-spirited lord in a cheerless flooded hall’ — in short, a Northern hell.<sup>37</sup> With

<sup>34</sup> Bosworth-Toller gives the idiomatic meaning, ‘remain in bed.’

<sup>35</sup> F. Klaeber, ed., *Beowulf* (Boston, 1968), p. 45, lines 1180b-1187.

<sup>36</sup> J. C. Pope, ed., “The Battle of Maldon,” in *Seven Old English Poems* (New York, 1966), pp. 17-18, lines 45-48.

<sup>37</sup> The place the wife is envisioning is markedly similar to Nastrandir, described in *Gylfaginning* as “a large and horrible hall whose doors face north;

relish, she envisions his despair as he remembers a pleasanter home, and in the last lines, sums up the essence of her curse: 'Woe be to him who is doomed in longing for love to wait.'

Obviously, for such an interpretation of the poem to be considered likely, two sorts of evidence must be offered: (1) that belief in such supernatural happenings was a familiar notion to an eighth-century Anglo-Saxon audience; and (2) that the language of the poem, through denotation and connotation, would lead such an audience to such an apprehension.

Evidence of the first sort is plentiful. The belief in 'barrow-wights,' the idea that the dead went on living in their burial mounds, was a common Anglo-Saxon superstition. In pre-Christian times, such beings were not necessarily evil; they were fed and consulted by the living, helped their loved ones with prophecies and charms, and even occasionally enjoyed their marital rights.<sup>38</sup> However, "With the coming of Christianity, the barrow-wight became more or less demoniac, and later stories of encounters of living and dead are of a darker kind."<sup>39</sup> Such spirits were not disembodied, but were rather animated corpses which roamed at night, returning at dawn to their graves.<sup>40</sup>

it is made of the backs of serpents . . . with all their heads turning into the house and spewing poison so that rivers of it run through the hall. Perjurers and murderers wade these rivers. . . ." The entrance to Hel (of which Nastrandir was the worst section) was through the cliff-cave, Gniphellir, which recalls the ice-rimed stone-cliff beneath which the husband will sit. (*The Prose Edda of Snorri Sturluson*, trans. Jean I. Young [Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1966], pp. 91, 88).

<sup>38</sup> For examples of friendly, though frightening, encounters with these animated corpses, see Ch. 51 of the *Eyrbiggja saga*, in which the dead Thorgunna cooks supper for her family in the home of an inhospitable farmer; Sigrun's visit to Helgi's barrow in *Helgakvitha Hundingsbana II*; and Ogvaldr's skaldic chant to Finn from his barrow in *Halfs saga*. The existence in England of these beliefs is attested to by such accounts as those in William of Newbury's *De Rebus Anglicis*: a widow of Buckinghamshire, plagued by the visits of her deceased husband, who, "On the night subsequent to his burial [as a] reanimated corpse entered his wife's bedroom, and not only frightened her, but nearly crushed her beneath his weight." (Thrupp, pp. 268-269).

<sup>39</sup> *The Mythology of All Races* (New York, 1964), II, 318.

<sup>40</sup> N. K. Chadwick, "Norse Ghosts," *Folk-Lore*, LVII (June, 1946), 50.



Such beliefs are startlingly apposite to the postulated situation of the speaker. Lines 33b-36b in particular contrast her behavior with that of her 'friends on earth, the loved ones living' (*Frynd sind on eorþan / leofe lifgende*), by emphasizing the limitations of her existence. They may keep to their beds, while she, at dawn, goes alone only as far as the graves under the oak-tree. The accusative neuter plural case of *þas eorðscrafu* offers difficulties to reading the speaker's habitation as the hut of an exile; that one such hut could be under a single oak is possible, but a cluster so situated seems unlikely. Lines 37-38 further delimit the speaker: she *must* remain<sup>41</sup>; she *may* mourn for her hard fate.

The references to exile throughout the poem are no impediment to the interpretation now proposed. They need not refer to a living exile; for, in a very real sense, death is an exile from human life, from friends, from love — from all the things for which the speaker yearns. Such a view lends the richness of irony to a retrospection of the first part of the poem. The plots of the kinsmen have been successful — husband and wife are truly *gewidost in woruldrice*, 'widest apart in the kingdoms of the world.' The accord which prompted their vow has been reversed, *onhworfen*, turned to its opposite; but the vow itself — *þæt unc ne gedælde / nemne deað ana*, 'that we would not be divided, save by death alone' — has been fulfilled. Certainly, the marriage is now *swa hit no wære* — 'as though it had never been.'

The accessibility of such an understanding of the poem to the poet's intended audience is an assertion more difficult to prove. First, is there any precedent in the literature for such a speaker? The answer to this question must be somewhat indecisive; though supernatural speakers (demons, angels, saints descended from heaven) abound in Old English poetry, ghostly speakers of precisely the sort postulated in this article are not, to my knowledge, else-

<sup>41</sup> It is possible to suggest translating *sittan* as 'sit' rather than 'remain.' Burials in a sitting position were not uncommon; and many of the barrow-dwellers in Norse literature are described as seated (e. g., Raknar in *Gests þattr Barþarsonar*, the twelve seated men in Odd's barrow in *Þorsteins þattr uxafots*, and Gunnar, seated as he sings from his mound in *Njals saga*).

where to be found in the Anglo-Saxon corpus. There are, however, many such speakers in Old Norse literature and in *Märchen*.<sup>42</sup>

But how, since there is no forthright statement in *The Wife's Lament* that the speaker is dead — I shall explore the reason for this lack later — could the poet's audience have been apprised of such a situation? First, as I have already suggested, the strictures on the wife's behavior and the peculiar nature of her abode would strongly suggest the barrow-wight of familiar legend. Second, the denotative and connotative meanings of all the words used to describe her residence are those of interment — so much so, that a modern translator has chosen the phrase, "living death," to describe the wife's fate.<sup>43</sup> The cumulative effect of the repetition of words like *eorðscræf*, 'earth-pit,' *eorðsele*, 'earth-hall,' and *leger*, 'tomb,' is funereal in the extreme; nor does the speaker ever refer to her residence as an earthly abode — the words for 'home,' 'hut,' 'house,' 'abode,' 'dwelling,' are conspicuously absent. In addition, the oak suggests a place sacred to the old religion, and an environment conducive to supernatural happenings.<sup>44</sup> It seems not at all unlikely, therefore, that the poet's audience, alerted to expect a death by the words *morþor* and *fæhðu*, would have understood the wife's description of her dwelling as fact, not fancy.

The associative suggestion which would have led them logically to such a conclusion is inherent in the poetics of the piece, and it

<sup>42</sup> The most notable examples from Norse literature are Angantyr in *Hervarar saga*, Gunnar in *Njals saga*, and Glam in the *Grettiis saga*. The utterances of these speakers are worth commenting on: Angantyr prophesies doom to Hervor, Gunnar sings in order to inspire vengeance on his murderer, and Glam curses Grettir. Miss Chadwick comments extensively on the connection between such revenants and song, prophecy, and curse (*op. cit.*, fn. 40, [June and September, 1946], pp. 50-65, 106-127). Grimm's *Kinder- und Haus-märchen* contains several tales with speakers of this sort; tales 4, 11, 107, and 109 involve speaking corpses rather than the more conventional spectre. Danish folk-lore is rich in examples of *draugr*; "The Three Pennies" (J. Christian Bay, trans. [New York and London, 1899], pp. 23-27) and "The Hill Man Invited to the Christening" (*Folk Lore and Legends: Germany and Scandinavia* [London, 1894], pp. 27-29) are typical.

<sup>43</sup> Burton Raffel, *Poems from the Old English* (Lincoln, Neb., 1960), p. 18.

<sup>44</sup> Davis, p. 303.



- First, my lord went hence from the people  
 Over the tossing of waves; I had dawn-care  
 Where, my people's prince of the land, thou wert.  
 Then I went forth to seek my place<sup>47</sup> with you,  
 10 A friendless exile out of my woe-need.  
 So it happened that this man's kinsmen intended  
 Through evil, secret thought that they should separate  
 us two,  
 That we two widest apart in the kingdoms of the world  
 Should live in the most hateful way, and I was in great  
 longing.
- 15 My lord commanded me to take this hard place;<sup>48</sup>  
 I had no dear ones in this region,  
 No dear friends. That is why my heart is sad,  
 That my perfect mate I found  
 Unfortunate, gloomy-hearted,  
 20 Dissembling of spirit, intent upon crime.  
 With blithe bearing we often boasted  
 That we two would be parted by nothing but death,  
 Naught else. Afterward, that was reversed;  
 It is now as though it had never been,<sup>49</sup>  
 25 Our closeness. I must far and near  
 Of my best-loved endure blood-feud.

He commanded me to remain in a grove of trees,  
 Under an oak-tree in the earth-pit.  
 Old is this earth-hall, utterly am I overcome with longing,  
 30 Dark are the depths, the hills are high,

likely; but no significant difference in meaning, however, occurs with either translation.

<sup>47</sup> Leslie, p. 7. Leslie plausibly suggests that *folgað secan* is intended to mean that the wife's purpose is to follow her husband abroad. "Since *folgað* has invariably the technical sense of service due to a lord by his retainers, and since the wife stood in the same relation to her husband as a retainer, there is a strong case for taking *folgað* as her duty to him as a wife."

<sup>48</sup> Three possibilities have been suggested for *herheard*: (1) emendation to *her heard*, making *heard* an attribute of *hlaforð*; (2) emendation to *her eard*, 'this land'; and (3) emendation to *herh-eard*, *herh* as a variation of *hearg*, hence 'temple-' or 'altar-dwelling.' Since *her* can mean 'in this place,' a compound with *heard* to mean 'place of hardship' or simply 'hard place' is suggested as a fourth possibility. The same compound appears in l. 74b of *The Riming Poem* (although the editors have emended the manuscript's *herheardes* to *her eardes*) in a context which explicitly outlines the body's decay in the grave.

<sup>49</sup> The greater part of line 24a has been lost.



Harsh his heart-thoughts, likewise he must be doomed to  
 keep  
 A blithe bearing; also heartsickness,  
 45 The perpetual sorrow he has suffered. May he be dependent  
 on himself alone  
 For all his worldly joy, may he be outlawed throughout  
 the full width  
 Of the far governed lands, so that my "friend" will dwell  
 Under a stone-cliff crusted with ice,  
 A sad-spirited friend in a dreary hall<sup>52</sup>  
 50 Flooded with water. My "friend" will endure  
 Great heartsickness; too often he will remember  
 A happier house. Woe be to him who is doomed  
 In longing for love to wait.

<sup>52</sup> I have transposed 49b and 50a to avoid awkwardness.