Women and Language

*Essays on Gendered
Communication Across Media*

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Delete as Appropriate: Writing Between the Lines of Female Orality in *The Wife's Lament*

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Ic this giedd wrece   bi me ful geomorre,
minre sylfre sith.   [*Wife's Lament* ll.1–2a]
[I make this song that is wholly sorrowful to me,
of my own journey.]

The anonymous tenth century poem known as *The Wife's Lament* is written from the perspective of a woman pining for her lover. Banished to live in an earth cave, the woman recounts her past life, referring to a confusing succession of leaders and beloved men who have betrayed her (Klinck, *WL* lines 93–94). Leaving it unclear whether this is a tale of adultery involving several different figures or a betrayal by one man with many faces, she describes the dark and desolate wood in which she sits "the summer long day, weeping for the many hardships of her exile" (*WL* 37b–39a), and contrasts her life with the joy of "lovers living on earth" who may lie in bed together, while she "walks alone at dawn" (*WL* 33b–35). Finally, her tone shifts to one of general reflection on men hiding their sorrow, and she pictures her beloved sitting isolated and "set about by storms under a stony cliff" (*WL* 47), in a familiar Anglo-Saxon topos of exile.

From the nineteenth century onward, this originally untitled piece of alliterative poetry has been entitled *The Wife's Lament* and has been packaged and preserved in a surprisingly diverse range of ways. As this chapter shows, the debate surrounding the text has cast it as a mystery to be solved, a problematic

work that falls short of modern readers' expectations regarding Anglo-Saxon genre and gender roles. As a result, critical attention has frequently bypassed the content of the text and the unmediated first-person voice of the tenth century female narrator. Rather, the focus has been on that which the text does not contain: explanatory context, clearly defined characters, a didactic message, and a consistent adherence to genre.

In attempting to create a location for this displaced text, a genre for this idiosyncratic poetic voice, and a wider explanatory context within which to pin down the ambiguous causes of the speaker's sorrow, the large majority of criticism on the poem has either ignored, refuted, or reframed a rare fragment of individualized female characterization. In place of a moderating narrator, the poem depicts a first person speaker who addresses her emotional response directly to the reader rather than placing her experiences in a social, ancestral, or didactic context. As will be further discussed below, this absence of conventional framing is what makes the voice of the speaker stand out so clearly across the centuries. What has emerged most visibly in critical editions of the poem, however, is the refusal of modern textual readings to contemplate the uncertainty generated by this female voice from the past.

This authoritarian approach has been exacerbated by the anonymous authorship of the poem. It may not be necessary to know whether, in the words of Virginia Woolf, the "Anon." who created the female speaker of the poem was herself a woman in order to comprehend the speaker as a representative of a female voice (50). Nonetheless, the anonymous authorship of the work has left the poem far more open to radical editing and inventive reinterpretation by a masculinist critical tradition than comparable works by named Old English authors, all of whom are male. Cases in point are the works of Aelfric and Alfred, both of whose works have remained strikingly unaltered in modern editions. The first step to understanding this process of appropriation and rediscovering the ambiguity and openness of the text is to consider the title. Here, modern scholars such as Anne Klinck and Elaine Treharne can be seen presenting the text in a form that is strikingly mediated and influenced by the controversial decisions of early editors. Thus, modern editions of the text routinely title the poem as *The Wife's Lament*, often failing to mention that this title was only added to the text in the nineteenth century. This means that before readers even begin the poem, editors like Klink have independently answered two questions that the text leaves open concerning the genre of the text and the social status and situation of the speaker (Klinck 93).

As a result of this added title, the woman in the *Lament* is outwardly defined by her marital status, although this is never clarified in the poem. Meanwhile, the male speakers of the originally untitled Anglo-Saxon poems now known as *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer* have come to be defined by

their occupation. The influence of the "wife" in the title has been so pervasive that even Marilynn Desmond, offering a feminist approach to the text, writes with ease about the speaker's "husband," despite having concluded only four sentences previously that "none of these terms [describing the men in the poem] specifically denotes a husband, and most are only seldom used to refer to a man's position in his marriage" (586).

Interestingly, there is only one other example of an Old English poem being named after the speaker's status: *The Husband's Message*— a poem often regarded as a companion piece to the *Lament* (Klinck 100–02). In this poem, a man in exile sends an engraved letter to his beloved, which speaks of his love for her and promises a return to the happiness they shared together if she journeys across the sea to meet him. While the link between the two works— namely the shared theme of lovers separated by exile—is superficially convincing, it does not stand up to closer investigation. *The Husband's Message* clearly describes his beloved as living "hung about with jewels" in a luxurious city (Klinck, *HM* 14), whereas the speaker in the *Lament* describes her lover as having "commanded her to live in this earth cave" (*WL* 27–28). She also makes it clear that it is she who is initially in exile, rather than her lover. These decisive indications of the speaker's situation show that the wife in the *Lament* cannot be the wife of *The Husband's Message*.

In this context, the accepted titles of both works must be regarded as critically anachronistic. This anachronism is particularly marked in the case of the *Lament,* however, since the poem never refers to a husband, but refers instead to "friendship" and "lordship" (*WL* 6, 25). "Friend" and "lord" are two potentially separate categories, neither of which would necessarily denote husband. In contrast, the "husband" of *The Husband's Message* is a more convincing title for a poet whose speaker describes a past life together and refers to the vows they made to one another in legalistic language (*HM* 16). It appears, then, that the theory of the two works as companion pieces is based primarily on the evidence of *The Husband's Message* and that the *Lament* has remained cast as an auxiliary to the other text. This acceptance of an outdated title is in keeping with the wider approach to the text as a negotiable quantity, which has been regarded as open to editorial emendation even in its most defining characteristics.

This form of authoritarian intervention by editors and critics has been directed primarily at the role of the speaker—a role that has been contested on all levels. A cursory reading of the text in literal translation reveals a number of details about the speaker: readers know that she must be a woman, because of the feminine endings used in words such as *sylfre* (*WL* 2a), which can be translated as 'own'; that she is inhabiting an earth cave of some kind in the wood; and that she is lonely and mourning a personal loss she has experienced on account of some man in her past.

Over the past two centuries each of these defining features of the speaker's self-identification has in turn been questioned and reinterpreted. As Desmond has pointed out, one of the key motives for these alterations has been an unwillingness on the part of modern critics to contemplate a female narrator in the Anglo-Saxon corpus (574). Along with the enigmatic poem *Wulf and Eadwacer*, the *Lament* is one of only two surviving Anglo-Saxon poems featuring a female speaker. In this context, the poem appears to represent a voice that was already marginalized in the speaker's own society: that of a female exile. Instead of drawing this voice back into the center of critical debate, however, critics such as Benjamin Thorpe, Rudolph Bambas, and Jerome Mandel have chosen to query the text and suggest instead that the unexpected female speaker is the result of scribal or editorial errors. This theory is based on the assumption that the use of feminine grammatical endings in the text is the result of scribal error, implying a surprisingly systematic failure of the scribal copying process. First suggested by early editor Thorpe in 1842, the theory remains surprisingly current. Interestingly, having posited a male speaker, Thorpe entitled the poem *The Exile's Lament*, no longer referring to the speaker's marital status but to his situation (441). This highlights the extent to which the identification of the poem with marriage was linked in the editor's mind with the speaker being a woman and became irrelevant once he had identified the speaker as male.

The argument for a male speaker is particularly surprising because the female gender of the speaker is one of the few tangible facts that emerges from the poem. While she uses gendered terms denoting status such as *hlaford* 'lord' (*WL* 6a); *leodfruma* 'leader of my people' (*WL* 8a) and *felaleofan* 'much beloved' (*WL* 26a), to describe the man, or men, she has dealt with, she refuses to reveal whether he is a lover, a husband, a lord, or even an individual person. However, the speaker's use of female adjectival and pronominal endings in phrases of self-description such as *bi me ful geomorre / minre sylfre sith* 'it is wholly sorrowful to me / my own journey' (*WL* 1b–2a, emphasis added) is less ambiguous and leaves no doubt that she is a woman.

Other alternative readings have also focused on diminishing the possibility of the speaker as a living woman. In 1983 William Johnson published one of the more recent readings of the poem as a death song (Green 80), interpreting the "earth cave" in which the speaker lives as a grave. This interpretation disregards the other contexts in which the Anglo-Saxon word "earth cave" is used to mean a barrow. A striking example of this arises in the Anglo-Saxon life of Saint Guthlac, who is described as living in an "earth cave" or barrow in the fens. Another popular interpretation of the poem has been based on Christian allegory, presenting the speaker as the mournful Christian Church longing to be reunited with her beloved Christ (Swanton 270–271).

Here too, the argument is focused on making sense of the poem's trajectory as a whole, glossing over the fact that the "beloved" of the poem deceives and betrays the speaker, inferring an unlikely image of Christ concealing murderous thoughts from the Church (*WL* 20b–21a). Other details of the poem, including the initial description of the family of the woman's beloved as treacherous (*WL* 12) and the speaker's envy of joyful lovers at dawn (*WL* 34), make this a highly unlikely devotional text. These apparent contradictions show the extent to which critics such as Swanton have been prepared to ignore decisive elements of the text in order to avoid a literal reading.

What all of these theories have in common is an overall reception of the text as a problem to be solved. As will be discussed below, the spotlight this type of criticism has cast on the so-called problems of the text reflects back on the critics themselves, revealing the outline of a totalizing, masculinist approach to reading Anglo-Saxon literature. Thus the underlying assumption driving the many interpretations discussed above is that the speaker cannot be read as a living woman. This, however, is a claim so flimsy that it dissolves under even the slightest investigation. Take, for example, the argument of Rudolf C. Bambas. Bambas explains that according to Anglo-Saxon poetic conventions "the only matters worth celebrating in verse are the affairs of heroic war chiefs" (303). Operating under this assumption, he concludes that a female speaker is therefore a practical impossibility.

Given the fact that so few Anglo-Saxon texts survive, Bambas's claim must be based directly on those scant and randomly selected texts still extant, making any generalizing conclusions somewhat tautological. In essence, Bambas's line of argument is that because so few texts with female speakers have survived, such texts did not exist, meaning that those texts that do exist are not rare examples of less common form, but the results of scribal error. According to this logic, any unusual textual forms at all would be subsumed into the form and genre of the majority, despite that majority itself being based on a very small sample of works.

Genre — *The Wife's Lament* as a "Deviant Elegy"

The literary context of the *Lament* has been as unnecessarily controversial as the poem's social and narrative context. The decision of early editors to cast this poem as a lament is not in itself surprising, nor is it even controversial. The speaker is clearly suffering great sadness, and she does indeed sorrow after what she has lost, describing "the pain of exile" (*WL* 5), and "the trials I have suffered" (*WL* 3). In the context of Anglo-Saxon literature, however, the word "lament" has taken on a more specific meaning, as it has become associated

with a genre described as the Anglo-Saxon elegy. Here, elegy is taken to mean not simply works written in a classical elegiac meter, or those concerned with lamenting the dead, but rather what Klinck describes as Anglo-Saxon works characterized by "a sense of separation: a distance in time and space between someone and their desire" (225).

Only a handful of these works remain, the most famous including *The Wanderer*, *The Seafarer*, and *The Ruin*, as well as the more enigmatic *Deor* and *The Husband's Message* (Klinck 30). Alongside these poems with male speakers, there is one additional Anglo-Saxon elegy, besides the *Lament*, which contains a female speaker: the similarly controversial *Wulf and Eadwacer*. All these works have been broadly referred to as Anglo-Saxon elegies, based on their shared theme of sorrowful loss. It is primarily the first two, however, on which current expectations of Anglo-Saxon elegies have been constructed. Thus *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer* share the central themes of "exile, solitude, the wintry sea, the remembered delights of the hall, [and] the contrast between earthly and heavenly values," which, as Klinck notes, have come to be considered the archetypal themes of Anglo-Saxon elegies (32).

The Wanderer and *The Seafarer* also share a number of literary features that post-nineteenth century scholarship presents as typical of Anglo-Saxon literature: both works are narrated by male speakers who speak of a past in which their status within Anglo-Saxon society was defined by the homosocial bond between their lord and themselves as his loyal subjects. This is clearly a strong element in *both* works — which depict lonely male travelers who describe themselves as exiled from the joys of society and kinship. Both speakers yearn for the joys in hall and love of their lord experienced in a past life that they have now lost. Both also speak of their loneliness as an oppressive and devastating fate, describing it as *wræclastas*, 'an exile's journeys' (*Wanderer* 5a), and *geswincdagum*, 'days of hardship' (*Seafarer* 2b). This emphasis on a yearning for the communality is defined by an enacted loyalty between a group of warriors. In this process, the individual is identified by the role he plays in battle, presenting a wholly masculine perspective of social interaction. The two genre-defining elegies are thus united in presenting masculine experiences of Anglo-Saxon life.

It is therefore perhaps not unexpected that a poem dealing with a woman's reaction to a personal tragedy does not correspond to the expected criteria of the elegy genre, despite its elegiac tone. The *Lament* clearly adopts the tone of a lament, reflecting as it does on loss, yet it is perceived as deviant in that it fails to affirm any of the social ideals described above. It does not contribute to a consistent narrative that exemplifies the bond of loyalty between a warrior and his lord — indeed, it does not speak of political or social practices at all. Instead, the frame of reference remains entirely personal throughout, beginning

with the speaker's description of her own sorrow and concluding with the depiction of her beloved's sorrow. This personal frame of reference is no coincidence; as a woman, the speaker cannot inhabit the role of loyal warrior assumed to be genre-defining by critics such as Levin Schücking (11). After all, the reader cannot be reassured of her conformity to Germanic ideals of warrior loyalty, as her gender would preclude her from being a warrior. Consequently, she would also never have participated in the elaborate social rituals in which loyalty in battle was sworn, quantified, and rewarded by the giving of gold when the battle was done.

Since the reader cannot be reassured as to the acceptable Anglo-Saxon virtues of loyalty this woman possesses, both the modern critic seeking Anglo-Saxon archetypes and presumably the contemporary Anglo-Saxon reader as well, must be somewhat disquieted by the indefinability of this woman's status and the personal rather than political nature of her allegiances. This uncertainty hinges on the words with which the men in the speaker's life are described as *hlaford* 'lord' (*WL* 6), and *felaleofan* 'much beloved' (*WL* 26), both words that could refer as much to a lord as to a lover, or indeed a husband. As a result of her undefined status this woman cannot be an authority but remains an exile whose lack of social context undermines her respectability. Lacking social prestige, the speaker is automatically precluded from fulfilling the third and most striking characteristic of Anglo-Saxon elegies as defined by the famous final passages of *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*: that of gnomic wisdom.

This literary feature, in which the speaker concludes his monologue by proffering advice on overcoming hardship and turning to God for inspiration, is a prominent characteristic of classical Anglo-Saxon elegy and stands in contrast to the emphasis on pagan Germanic loyalty in other parts of *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*. The same dichotomy can be found shaping other Anglo-Saxon works, most famously *Beowulf*, in which the anonymous poet creates a distance between him or herself and the pagan hero, Beowulf, by inserting Christian references, such as those in which Beowulf's first attacker, the monster Grendel, is described as a descendant of Cain. The Christian frame of reference serves to incorporate guiding elements of the poet's Christian world view into the very text of a poem based on older pre–Christian stories, a textual combination that critics such as Richard North have read as an archetypal expression of the contradictions between Christian and heroic ideals of good life and rule (North 195).

It is on the basis of works such as these that a canon of Anglo-Saxon literature has been retrospectively projected onto the surviving corpus. This canon, framed within the context of spiritual debate, systematically marginalizes any texts that might obfuscate the clear opposition between the pagan

Germanic warrior and the devout early Christian monk that interested the learned men of the nineteenth century

In the *Lament*, however, even the most challenging editorial interventions have failed to dissolve the uncertainties that characterize the speaker. The non-negotiable kernel of pointed literary ambiguity has remained preserved within the opacity of the speaker's imagery. This technique culminates in the final passage of the poem, in which the image the speaker creates of her beloved—sitting in desolation beneath a stormy cliff—subverts the genre of elegy by failing to deliver the didactic wisdom the preceding lines promise (*WL* 45–48). Where other elegies conclude such generalized observations as "always a young man must be sad" (*WL* 42), with advice and consolation for all, the *Lament* proceeds to turn it instead into an extended image of loneliness (*WL* 45–48), which is just as likely to be a curse as it is to be a fact, a fear, or even a gleefully satisfying revenge fantasy. This equivocal end encapsulates the irreconcilable elements of revenge, indignation, and fractured identity within the speaker and the refusal of the author to resolve the contradictions of the poem.

Considerations and Conclusions

The conclusions one can draw from this study are just as revealing with regard to the editors and critics as they are with regard to the text itself. Despite the varied and extensive criticism on the *Lament*, the poem remains ambiguous with regard to its narrative and implied context. Put simply, none of the theories expounded above have been able to fully convince the majority of readers and critics. As a result, what has emerged most clearly from critical debate is the fact that this is a poem that defies classification and tells a story that is not coherent on a narrative level.

Critics such as Patricia Belanoff have described the "polysemous" nature of the vocabulary within the poem and the poem's exclusive focus on experiential elements of the speaker's life rather than contextualizing details such as place names. Given this emphasis, it should come as no surprise that the *Lament* expresses an emotional state rather than a plot-based narrative (Belanoff 202). In this context, there is indeed a mystery surrounding how one is to read the poem, but that mystery is not the question of "what is this poem about?" Clearly, the poem is about the speaker's distress, framed in a deliberately oblique context. For the modern reader, the real mystery is what lies at the root of the many desperate attempts by modern critics to re-interpret the poem's content.

This observation is not as flippant as it appears. Given the amount of critical smoke obfuscating this short, 53-line poem, it is valid and necessary

to ask: who started the fire and why did they do so? This line of questioning brings the critical response to the poem into sharp focus, offering a revealing history of repressive reception. Hence the most striking element of all the interpretations previously discussed is the extent to which they base their understanding of the text on outside factors, ranging from social and political context to literary genre. While these are valid components of an analysis, they can only be helpful as complements to the evidence of the text itself, and this is where these approaches have failed.

Not all the theoretical readings of the *Lament* have been as overtly dismissive of the textual evidence as that of Bambas. Nonetheless, the credence given to his theory of a scribal error in grammar reveals how far twentieth century criticism was prepared to go in misunderstanding this poem, with most recent support coming from Jerome Mandel in 1987 (154). Both Bambas and Mandel present the text as misleading and mysterious and in doing so obscure those aspects of the speaker's self-identification that are taboo in that they contradict established ideas of Anglo-Saxon literary culture. As Julia Kristeva writes in "About Chinese Women," the narrative and literary problems that critics invite readers to dwell on often serve to protect a narrative taboo that is still being observed. Kristeva draws this conclusion from her efforts to expose the Freudian focus on the Oedipus myth as a smokescreen to distract attention from a myth that threatens patriarchal discourse: that of Klytemnestra (151). Klytemnestra's murder of her husband Agamemnon threatens the passive acceptance of male sexualized authority in the homes of Ancient Greece — a gendered hierarchy that is one of the unspoken premises of how the Renaissance was later to interpret the ideal of the Greek demos (Kristeva 151).

This reclaiming of the myth can be applied to the *Lament* on quite a simplistic level if one considers further the work of writers, such as Barrie Ruth Straus. Straus has attempted to redress the masculinist bias underlying much critical discussion by casting the *Lament* not as a lament, but as the curse of an empowered female voice, resembling the strong women of the Norse sagas (Straus 284). At first glance, this appears to be a reading that empowers the speaker, who is no longer presented as a suffering victim but as a potent enemy, condemning her treacherous beloved to a terrible fate. If scholars are truly interested in divesting the text of critical authoritarianism, however, they must resist such a reading. Thus the martial vocabulary with which Straus entitles her essay, "Women's Words as Weapons," already indicates a reading intent on perpetuating the myth of Anglo-Saxon literature as heroic, even when faced with a poem as personally mournful as the *Lament*. It seems that in offering readers an alternative framework of strong women within which to resolve the uncertainties of the poem, Straus colludes in what

must be regarded as the most oppressive assumption of all: that this text is an enigma to be solved in order to suit current perceptions of Anglo-Saxon literary norms.

Underlying this authoritarian suppression of the multivalent text is what Kristeva might describe as the taboo that is still being observed: that of a narrative content based on ambivalence and subjectivity and therefore resistant to fully conclusive historicist interpretation of any kind, including those that empower women. The dangers of such texts are immediately apparent, if we regard them as the bomb with which the myth of the learned poet of the Anglo-Saxon *comitatus* can be exploded.

It is surprisingly simple to read the *Lament* as containing an element of many of the theories outlined above: an elegy with a female speaker; a speaker in whose eyes the different masculine roles of lord, husband, and lover she has been confronted with blur into one. Put more radically, she might be a woman whose existence is so cut off from society and miserable that it is hard to tell whether she is alive or dead. Rather than being contradictory, all of these elements are in fact complementary to one another. If one accepts the poem as an individualized expression of anger and sorrow rather than a description of the underlying events, then the emotions of the speaker constitute the main content of the text. The same can be said of the final passages of the poem, which subvert the expectations of elegiac works, by replacing the wise reflection one might find in *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer* with a far more ambiguous image of suffering. In this context, again, one need not decide between reading the image of the sorrowful man presented in these lines as knowledge, curse, or even wishful thinking, since all of these elements are so clearly present in the work. Having suffered at the hands of this man, the speaker gains some satisfaction from envisioning her treacherous friend in a scene of classic Anglo-Saxon desolation.

Scholars cannot know that the *Lament* was written by a woman. Although female literacy was strikingly high in Anglo-Saxon society, those authors who are named in their works are all men (Brown 45). It would therefore be rash to assume female poets behind the anonymous works that have survived — although that too would tell its own tale of marginalized women's voices. What can be said with more certainty of the poet, however, is that he or she was trying to create a female voice that would represent a type of experience otherwise almost entirely absent from the surviving Anglo-Saxon corpus. The *Lament* is one of only two surviving Anglo-Saxon works with female speakers and it is quite telling that these two works have sparked such critical controversy over the years.

That is not to say that the many critics who have attempted to interrogate and "redress" the texts have done so solely because these texts have female

speakers, although that is clearly one of the reasons. Rather, one can conclude more broadly that the Anglo-Saxon poets who wrote *Wulf and Eadwacer* and the *Lament* present both their female speakers and the stories they tell in ways that modern criticism has been unable to accept as a straightforward part of the Anglo-Saxon corpus.

Thus, these female speakers do not identify themselves through their names, or even through their status; rather, they are socially anonymous throughout their texts. This stands in striking contrast to the traditions of Anglo-Saxon heroic poetry, for example, in which the names of the male warriors are emphasized alongside the names of their fathers, drawing attention to their status and heritage. Instead, these women identify themselves through their experiences and express their emotional responses to these experiences in the form of direct address in the absence of adjudicating narrators. The men these women interact with are equally ill-defined. Despite the fact that the speaker's situation results from the man's actions, she makes no attempt to explain the situation and the motives underlying the manner in which this man or these men have shaped her life.

In all of these aspects of the poem, the *Lament* defies not only modern totalizing readings but also what scholars expect from historical Anglo-Saxon texts: a corpus dominated by military or devotional works whose sometimes contradictory values are embodied in canonized works with male protagonists, including the epic *Beowulf, The Battle of Maldon, The Wanderer,* and *The Seafarer.* Many modern scholars' expectation continues to be for Anglo-Saxon texts to resemble these canonical works in expressing status, wisdom, and a sense of continuity, while focusing on the role of the individual within society. In most cases that individual is a male representative of a profession, such as the seafarer, the warrior, the king, or else he is defined by his situation, as in the case of *The Wanderer* or "the last survivor" in *Beowulf.*

As discussed above, however, women are largely unrepresented in Anglo-Saxon literature, and given their apparently low social status, they would not have the authority to appear in socially representative roles, to boast of war or give lectures on how to live life. As a result, those writers creating or simply capturing the voices of female speakers are forced to show a more personalized experience of Anglo-Saxon society, less affected by the political and religious demands of masculine poetic traditions.

The result is the *Lament,* in which pronouncements on life and didactic or exemplary narratives and characterizations are replaced by the seemingly contradictory expression of how a situation of exile might be experienced by one particular woman. The woman in question is angry as well as sad and her ultimate frame of reference is her fractured history and the fruit of her own imagination rather than a divine or philosophical framework. This problematic,

personalized emphasis is contained within the allusive self-description that arises throughout the text, which places the speaker slightly outside of herself, describing her own reflection as an exiled woman, rather than fully inhabiting the role of lonely exile and speaking from within it. A key example of this disenfranchised self-representation can be found in line 29, where the speaker exclaims *Eal ic eom oflongade*; here the woman claims literally 'I am afflicted by longing'; she does not actively yearn but is passively consumed by the feeling. The precedent for this is first set up in line one of the speaker's tale of woe, *bi me ful gemorre,* 'is wholly sad to me' (*WL* 1b). Again, the speaker is not sad, but something is saddening to her; she is not active but passive and therefore remains disconnected from her own emotions.

In a poem explicitly concerned with this sadness, such a displacement serves to fragment the voice of the speaker, who is at the same time an observer of the forces that lay hold of her emotions, and a passive recipient of them. This fragmentation is one of the strengths of the poem, because it leads to irreconcilable contradictions, between the speaker's sorrow, as expressed in the early parts of the poem, and her aggressive and confused ambivalence as expressed in the final image of the text: the man himself exiled. The fact that the speaker's expression does not seek to be unified and exemplary is the key to the interest the speaker continues to generate.

At the same time, the speaker's use of Anglo-Saxon words with a wide and ambiguous semantic range such as *hlaford* 'lord' draws out the semiotic potential of a language frequently confined within strict *poetic* and thematic mores. Further, the speaker's use of desolate landscape imagery indicating her mood makes it impossible to determine what exactly has happened to her, or indeed where she positions herself within the events of the poem. Rather than explaining her current situation, the speaker's passive self-references and ambiguous descriptions raise as many questions as they answer. This is not a shortcoming of the work, however. Ironically, the wide range of inventive and contradictory readings of the *Lament* illustrates how ultimately successful the speaker's insistent subjectivity has been in conjuring up confusing images of a fractured identity. An example of this is the theory of the speaker as dead; Johnson's conclusion that she must be dead (Green 71) is based primarily on the speaker's contrasting of her own "desolate hall" (*WL* 29a) with the mornings of lovers "living on earth" (*WL* 34a). This juxtaposition is well-suited to describing the experience of exile as a living death. Indeed the exiled woman would be regarded as "dead to the world." The same can be said of the final lines of the poem, in which curse, regret, and wishful thinking merge into one another in the speaker's mind.

Given the absence of any recognizable masculine perspective in the poem, the one interpretation that is directly at odds with the text is that which would

deny the speaker to be a female voice. Thus a reading based on a masculine speaker would suggest consistent and unusual scribal error in the surviving text — always a dubious basis for any theory. More strikingly, it would also suggest that this text is the only Anglo-Saxon text in the corpus to present a male figure speaking of personal feelings and family relationships that go beyond the homosocial bonding of the lord's retinue in the mead hall. Given the female grammatical endings in the text, it appears more likely that the unusual emotional emphasis of the poem is a reflection of the speaker's female perspective. Indeed, the argument for a male speaker is so strained that it holds up an intriguing mirror to the masculinist face of twentieth century Anglo-Saxon scholarship, which goes to great lengths to portray the gender roles of the Anglo-Saxon world in its own image. Bearing this in mind, one can only conclude that the plethora of alternative readings concerning the *Lament* are the result not of misunderstandings but of a concerted effort to silence the tenth century speaker of the poem and to mold the multivalent text into hermeneutic unity.

Despite such attempts to muffle this woman's voice in murmurings about scribal error, however, this is still a text that unequivocally demands to be read on the speaker's terms, and such a reading must encompass the shifting meaning within the words and images themselves. As a result, the *Lament* remains one of a handful of Anglo-Saxon texts whose interpretation has not been signed and sealed in the canon, leaving it open to fresh readings by a generation of scholars less encumbered by the shadow of nineteenth century historical constructions of an Anglo-Saxon heroic ideal. The rewards for doing so are great, as readers are shown a voice that departs from the dutiful deference to God that shapes many other Anglo-Saxon poems, in order to show an altogether more vivid fragment of the brittle individuality forced upon someone excluded from the ideal of Anglo-Saxon communal life, both as a woman and as an exile.

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