



Seductive Voices: Rethinking Female Subjectivities in *The Wife's Lament* and *Wulf and Eadwacer*

Helene Scheck*

State University of New York, Albany

Abstract

This essay provides a summary of recent scholarship on the two female-voiced Old English elegies, *The Wife's Lament* and *Wulf and Eadwacer*, relating to the position or condition of women in Anglo-Saxon England as 'witnessed' in those poems. In doing so I make no attempt to champion a particular view, but try instead to consider the implications of reading in particular ways and think about how the questions raised by these poems may broaden our understanding of female subject positions in Anglo-Saxon England, even if we cannot ultimately come to any conclusions about what and how those poems mean.

Full sadly I tell this tale about myself,
my own journey. I am able to tell it –
what hardships I have endured since I grew up,
new or old, never greater than now.
Ever have I struggled against the torment of my miseries.
(*The Wife's Lament* lines 1–5)¹

In every revolution there are winners and losers. The emergence of written culture in the Middle Ages is no different. There is only one official version of the story and it is told by the written records themselves: the rest is very largely silence. (Stock 30)

The female speaker of the so-called *The Wife's Lament* beckons to us across the rifts of time, culture, and language. Her yearnings and misgivings invite us to imagine a strong, solitary female subject in the Anglo-Saxon period who, if subjugated, at least voices her protest. The speaker of *Wulf and Eadwacer*, too, offers her own sad tale in a strong female voice. These two enigmatic and isolated voices exceed the male-voiced elegies in their emotional depth and egocentrism, thereby heightening the sense of an interior selfhood. Moreover, both poems relate experiences that are particularly feminine and seem to offer, therefore, some insight into the Anglo-Saxon female psyche. In the case of *The Wife's Lament*, the narrator asks us to listen to the song of her *sið*, her 'journey'. Her journey, though,

is not like that of her male counterparts in the *Wanderer* or the *Seafarer*, who, free to roam the world, actively explore their options and bemoan their losses. The woman of this poem is exiled and apparently imprisoned, either literally or figuratively. She is left with nothing to ponder but her innermost thoughts, past experiences, whatever hope may remain for her lord's return, and whatever bitter regrets and grudges she harbors. For her there are no other options. Her story is one of betrayal, loss, and enclosure. The speaker in *Wulf and Eadwacer*, too, bemoans her fate in a heart-rending tale of love and loss, or lover lost. Because they are so poignant and seem like true narrative accounts of lived experience, these two poems may seem like sites of recovery of an elusive Anglo-Saxon female subject. Without resolving any of the ambiguities pervading these poems, this essay will consider what these poems suggest about lived experience for women in late Anglo-Saxon England on the one hand and formations of the female subject in that cultural context on the other.²

Although the female narrators and their respective states of exile and imprisonment, literal or figurative, remain enigmatic, feminist interpretations of these poems in the past two decades or so have sought to expose the potential power of the female voice.³ Marilyn Desmond argues not only for the validity of the female voice, but the possibility of female authorship as well.⁴ Reiterating Virginia Woolf's famous assertion that 'anonymous was a woman,' Desmond questions the automatic assumption of male authorship of anonymous texts. In relation to these two enigmatic female-voiced texts of the late Anglo-Saxon period, Desmond finds the elision of female subjectivity dangerous and urges readers to move beyond proscriptive readings. Helen Bennett also criticizes the narrow-mindedness of modern readings of the poems, which, to her, 'demonstrated that the exclusively male class structure of Anglo-Saxon heroic society – including lord, thane, and *scop* – is partially a product of the modern academic tradition of literary interpretation' (53).⁵ Alexandra Hennessy Olsen, too, encourages readers to challenge traditional modes of understanding, since such modes obviously do not render satisfactory readings of either of these texts.⁶ In these readings the narrators are not passive victims, but women who vociferously protest their subjugation.

For feminist scholars active subjectivity in these poems derives principally from use of language. Demonstrating the potential power of the female voice in *The Wife's Lament*, Barrie Ruth Straus maintains that

Telling her story from her own point of view is a positive act for the speaker, the means by which she attempts to control the way the events of her life will be seen. The way the wife tells her story—that is, the way she uses words—reveals that she does not merely passively accept her fate, but rather takes advantage of a form of action available to women of her time. (337)

Dorothy Ann Bray places *The Wife's Lament* in a larger anti-heroic tradition, connecting the poem to a female-voiced Welsh poem. Bray contends

The formalization of a lament in a woman's voice, against the background of the heroic, martial ideology which was present in both cultures, reveals the similar plights of women in such societies when it collapses and they are without a male kinship network. (152)

Both women, she asserts, 'are accorded the dignity of speech to give full vent to their feelings' (152). Although Bray does not argue for female authorship, she does at least acknowledge pro-feminine or proto-feminist sympathies in the respective authors:

The Welsh and Anglo-Saxon poets who upheld heroic values used the conventions of poetry and speechmaking to offer a critique of the martial heroic ideals, and have left us with the voices of heroic women who suffered when those ideals failed them. (153)⁷

Such arguments are both attractive and compelling on the whole, but they also present difficulties in terms of female subject possibilities. Using speech-act theory, for example, Straus asserts that

[the Wife's] female strength contrasts with that of the Anglo-Saxon Judith, who can be seen to have assimilated the male model of aggressive behavior. The speaker in *The Wife's Lament*, like the Wife of Bath, much later, shows us how female strength goes beyond endurance and how women act by using words as weapons. . . . In a culture where heroism is closely tied to fame and shame . . . , a narrative which allows an awareness of the patriarchal order as a cause of the unhappy fate of women and which ends with a curse heaping woe on the specific males who perpetuate that order is a surprisingly strong weapon. (350)

In trying to demonstrate the power of the female voice, Straus makes a problematic comparison with Chaucer's Wife of Bath, a male-authored female character who on the one hand protests masculinist representations of women and on the other hand proves such stereotypes correct in her characterization. Chaucer's creation, however complex and alluring, is still *his* creation and therefore demonstrates a man's view of how a woman *might* act by 'using words as weapons'. Likewise, the tenth-century female-voiced Anglo-Saxon poems, if male authored, pose problems of representation and appropriation of the female voice. Moreover, there is a problem with generic expectations and conventions as well, particularly given the paucity of the evidence. Two poems are not enough to generalize much of anything, let alone identify a characteristic female voice or experience, so these poems must be read within the larger elegiac tradition, which is male. As Clare Lees notes,

if we are to read the elegies as one place in the poetry where the internal psychological state of the individual matters, then it follows that in Anglo-Saxon England that individual is male, even when, or perhaps especially when, that voice is universalized. Pertinent examples are the warrior voice of the *The Wanderer*, and the peculiarly literal and metaphoric voice of *The Seafarer*. Located in the intersection between gender and genre, the female voice of, for

example, *The Wife's Lament* has to be accommodated within, or objected from, the conventions of the male. (157)

But what about the other aspects of the poems? Surely these powerful texts have something to tell us about the women they reflect. It is true that, however convincing some interpretations may be, no readings fully resolve the difficulties of either poem. Perhaps the ambiguities themselves may prove useful. Several questions come to mind in rethinking the poems in terms of lived female experience. First of all, although aspects of the poems are historically plausible, the respective plights of the women in the poems seem remote to a tenth-century Anglo-Saxon audience, rather than reflective of lived experience. John Niles avers that *The Wife's Lament* is set during the time of the Germanic migrations in the 'favorite "once-upon-a-time" of the Anglo-Saxon secular aristocracy' (1112), a 'more raw and primitive past' that 'furnished Anglo-Saxons with many of their reveries and some of their nightmares as well' (1150). Similar arguments have been made for *Wulf and Eadwacer*.⁸ But what might that nostalgic impulse mean to the women in the audience? Anglo-Saxon women may well have understood the adulterous fantasy suggested in *Wulf and Eadwacer*, given the reality of political unions. Likewise, the women of tenth-century England may have found something to relate to in *The Wife's Lament* under the threat of Danish invasions. It is not inconceivable, for instance, that a woman may have concealed herself within an *eordscreaf* during the heat of invasion to protect herself from rape and capture.⁹ Even in such a situation, though, would a woman find nothing to do but mourn for her man – a man who may have even betrayed her (depending, of course, on one's reading of the poem)? It is important to remember, too, that Alfred's daughter Æðelflæd, Lady of the Mercians, successfully warded off such a Danish infiltration. In an age when women could rule as effectively as their male counterparts in certain (albeit rare) situations and when women were able to give, sell, and keep property, what message do these poems send? Are we to imagine that a woman forged no alliances of her own once she was married? Even if she moved to her husband's region, once exiled could she not return to her own? These questions force us to consider not the 'real' woman in either poem, but the motivations for these models, the rationale for inventing female responses to the heart-rending circumstances and conditions of their existence in the world of each poem, if not in real life. By crafting such responses the poems help to cultivate particular perceptions of women and even, perhaps, to prescribe appropriate behaviors by delimiting in the cultural imagination possibilities for action (or, in these cases, inaction, however moving their words are).

In the context of late Anglo-Saxon England and the tenth-century monastic reforms, the movement toward strict active enclosure may well have prompted the composition of these poems. Whatever else it may mean, their appearance in the Exeter Book suggests mainstream currency.

As Shari Horner argues, ‘The seemingly stable gender identities of the female elegiac speakers are . . . likewise the products of culturally established ‘expressions’ of gender mandated by the terms of female religious enclosure’ (31). They may express male anxiety about the need for female enclosure. Conversely, they may express female anxiety about enclosure. Either way, they may well have emerged out of the shifting surface of ecclesiastical culture.¹⁰

The speakers’ desires pose other complications in understanding the poems and the subjectivities they present. Although both poems seem genuine in their portrayal of female angst and despair, the nature of desire in both poems may just as easily be rooted in male fantasy. The woman bereft of her husband is just as lost as the warrior without his lord – a parallel that implies the impossibility or unacceptability of female autonomy. The woman narrator of *The Wife’s Lament*, for all of her eloquence, is completely immobilized without her husband, desiring nothing more than to have him by her side again. In the case of *Wulf and Eadwacer*, female desire becomes even more complicated, since we cannot determine with any certainty the object of her desire and what her complaint is really about. If, for example, we understand the woman in *Wulf and Eadwacer* to have been married off against her will to Eadwacer while remaining in love with Wulf, the speaker may be expressing contempt for herself in that she is sleeping with the enemy – whether husband or captor – and enjoying it: ‘When the battle-bold one laid his arms around me, it was to me a joy; yet it was also hateful to me’.¹¹ Much depends on whether we understand the ‘battle-bold one,’ *beaducafa*, to be Wulf or Eadwacer. If it is the latter, several questions arise. Would a female author depict a woman taken prisoner or married off against her will as feeling anything but repulsion during intercourse, which it seems can only be forced? Does the poem speak more to the rapability of women than to women’s own personal longings? If, on the other hand, we take Wulf to be the ‘*beaducafa*’ and probably a lover with whom she began a relationship after her marriage, these same lines suggest her pleasure and guilt in continuing the affair, a possibility that finds parallels in the stereotype of the adulterous woman as presented in Old English literature, but may also be a genuine expression of the ambivalence and instability of adulterous love.¹²

The way in which these poems present female subjectivity in their own age, then, is impossible to ascertain. *The Wife’s Lament* and *Wulf and Eadwacer* are the only extant female-voiced poems written in Old English, and the best candidates, therefore, for female authorship. They are also, however, the best candidates for male-authored manipulation of the female subject through literary representation. They may appropriate the female voice to present skewed remembrances of an earlier time in which women were perceived to be completely dependent upon and subject to their male guardians – whether husband, brother, father, uncle, or captor. In that nostalgic light, these poems may have served as subtle reminders for women of the late Anglo-Saxon period that they, too, ultimately were

subject to their male guardians and that their power, however real, was at least as vulnerable as the women of these poems found it. Rather than being suggestive of lived experience of tenth-century England, these elegies may be prescriptive tales hearkening back to an earlier age in which women were perceived to be subject to their male kin for protection and direction in life. We cannot know, of course, but I would argue that the question of how these poems mean is itself a useful enterprise that serves to enhance our understanding of the complexities of Anglo-Saxon culture and the women that culture produced.

Short Biography

Helene Scheck is assistant professor of English at the State University of New York, Albany, where she teaches courses in medieval literature and culture. Her book, *Reform and Resistance: Formations of Female Subjectivity in Early Ecclesiastical Culture* is being published by the State University of New York Press (forthcoming, July 2008). She co-edited with Virginia Blanton *Intertexts: Studies in Anglo-Saxon Culture Presented to Paul E. Szarmach* (forthcoming, Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, May 2008) and is currently working on women's intellectual culture in early medieval Germania, 750–1050.

Notes

* Correspondence address: State University of New York, Albany, 1400 Washington Avenue, Albany, New York 12222, United States. Email: hscheck@albany.edu.

¹ *'Ic þis giedd wrece bi me ful geomorre, / minre sylfre sið. Ic þæt secgan mæg/hwæt ic ymþa gebad siþþan ic up weox, / niwes oþþe ealdes, no ma þonne nu. / A ic wite wonn minna wræcstþa'* (Klinck, *Old English Elegies*). I use Klinck's edition for both poems.

² Carol Braun Pasternack's 'Post-structuralist Theories: The Subject and the Text' provides an excellent introduction to the concept of the subject in poststructuralist thought as it pertains to and connects with Old English studies. For a good discussion of feminist criticism and of Old English literature, see Lees.

³ For a useful and fairly comprehensive survey and discussion of scholarship on as well as feminist interpretations of these poems, see Åström. Henk Aertsen's '*Wulf and Eadwacer*' provides a useful and comprehensive survey of older scholarship on that poem. James J. Donahue's 'Of this I Can Make No Sense' offers an updated survey of scholarship on that poem to demonstrate the failure of criticism to produce a uniform reading of the poem and finds in poststructuralism a way to articulate the failure of any text to produce a stable meaning, even for the original audience.

⁴ 'The Voice of Exile: Feminist Literary History and the Anonymous Anglo-Saxon Elegy'. Desmond's main concern was the erasure of the female voice completely, both through modern editorial practices in emending the female pronoun of the first line to the expected male pronoun and through allegorical interpretations of the poem that deny the power and autonomy of the female voice. The question of authorship is an extension of the same impulse. Anne Klinck takes up this question more recently in 'Poetic Markers of Gender'. After an analysis of the female voice in male-authored, female-authored, and anonymous poems, Klinck concludes that there is ultimately no convincing indication of female authorship for these poems, acknowledging at the same time that the process of sexing otherwise unknown authors is fraught with difficulty.

⁵ 'Exile and the Semiosis of Gender in Old English Elegies'. Ironically, Bennett adopts such a reading of the poem herself when she characterizes Anglo-Saxon society: 'A society based on an economy of war is a society of men, a society in which masculinity itself becomes the only

class. In this society, being a woman means being an exile, since there is no role for woman in a society predicated on war and death' (43). Bennett's notions of Anglo-Saxon society seem to be based solely on literary evidence or at the very least they ignore cultural developments of the Anglo-Saxons after the earliest period. It is true that, as Bennett observes, 'Tribes and kingdoms constantly engage in feuds; thanes aspire to fight well, and, when necessary, to die with and for their lord' (44). But the same could be said about most, if not all, Western societies from classical to modern times. Her assertion that 'Anglo-Saxon society is organized for war. It depends, in fact, on war for the very survival of its structure' (44), therefore, seems flawed. Anglo-Saxon society is not simply a heroic, warrior society, though the 'classics' of Anglo-Saxon literature create such an illusion. Surely other organizing principles obtain, not least of which was the Church, which offered women for a time prominent positions and substantial autonomy. To acknowledge only the warrior class and the warrior code is to ignore other voices and other possibilities for subject formation, female as well as male. In 'Unnatural Authority' Susan Signe Morrison advocates reading beyond the binarisms inherent in what she calls the 'heroic mode,' which she believes has been 'naturalized in Anglo-Saxon studies' and opens up the word 'sið' according to Christian virtues through philological analysis to 'deconstruct the heroic ethos read into the Old English canon'. Building on earlier readings valorizing the female voice, Morrison offers what she calls a 'nongendered' reading of *The Wife's Lament* that accords with the Christian ethos dominating tenth-century England.

⁶ 'Old English Women, Old English Men: A Reconsideration of "Minor" Characters'.

⁷ Other scholars also read an active rather than passive female subject, focusing on female language and tradition. Patricia A. Belanoff offers a Kristevan reading, exploring the manifestation of *l'écriture féminine* in 'Women's Songs, Women's Language'. Lois Bragg sets these poems in a larger, specifically female tradition in "'Wulf and Eadwacer", "The Wife's Lament", and Women's Love Lyrics of the Middle Ages'. Anne Klinck, too, places these poems in a larger tradition of *Frauenlieder*, or women's songs, across cultures. See, for example, Klinck's 'Sappho and Her Daughters'. In contrast, Dolores Warwick Frese uses a cognate episode in Layamon's *Brut* (late 12th, early 13th century) to elucidate aspects of *The Wife's Lament* and tease out a mythopoetic reading of the text as a political rather than personal account.

⁸ See for example Csaba Oppelt, 'Meaning in Hiding – Deciphering *Wulf and Eadwacer*,' who uses the Sigmund episode in the Old Norse *Völsunga Saga* to make sense of ambiguous and cryptic elements of the poem. She is not the first to do so, only the most recent.

⁹ See Paul Battles, 'Of Graves, Caves, and Subterranean Dwellings: *Eorðscreaf* and *Eorðsele* in the *Wife's Lament*'.

¹⁰ For a good background essay on the tenth-century reform, see Hill. To appreciate better the shifting landscape of ecclesiastical culture in the late Anglo-Saxon period, see also Irvine in the same volume.

¹¹ '*þonne mec se beaducafa bogum bilegde – / wæs me wyn to þon; wæs me huwpre eac lað*' (lines 11–12).

¹² See Audrey L. Meaney, 'The *Ides* of the Cotton Gnostic Poem,' especially where Meaney observes that 'We find in OE gnomic verse . . . as a recurring theme, the idea of the proper place of woman; and how she may lose the respect due to her by unchastity or merely by immodesty – her behaviour should be such that she is above suspicion; for there are many ready to condemn her' (34). Assuming an adulterous affair in *Wulf and Eadwacer*, Meaney suggests that the speaker 'would be the kind of wife the gnomic poets disapprove of so strongly, involved with a man who seems to have been banished to the fringes of society' (36). She goes on, however, to read the poem not as an affirmation, but a critique of such social attitudes: 'The fenny island and the rainy weather at the time of their meeting, which presumably provide cover for it, all emphasise that Wulf is unacceptable to society, and that she herself offends society by loving him. Yet our sympathies are with her; and surely it is the Anglo-Saxon poet's recognition of the fact that powerful passion will not be constrained by the normal bonds of society that gives this poem its universal appeal' (36).

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Wulf And Eadwacer Lyrics. Leodum is minum swylce him mon lac gife; Willa hƿy hine aƿecgan, gif he on ƿreat cyme. Ungelic is us Wulf is on iege, ic on oƿerre Fƿist is ƿtƿeder ond ic reotugu sƿt ƿzonne mec se beaducafa bogum bilegde Wƿs me wyn to ƿon, wƿs me hwƿre eac la. Ungelice is us (x3) Wulf, min Wulf, wena me ƿine Seoce gedýdon, ƿine seldcymas Murnende mod, nales meteliste Gehyrest u, Eadwacer? "Wulf and Eadwacer" is an Old English poem of famously difficult interpretation. It has been variously characterised, (modernly) as an elegy, (historically) as a riddle, and (in speculation on the poem's pre-history) as a song or ballad with refrain. The poem's complexities are, however, often asserted simply to defy genre classification, especially with regard to its narrative content. The poem's only extant text is found within the tenth-century Exeter Book, along with certain other texts to which Wulf and Eadwacer is one of the most enigmatic Old English poems, since the story it alludes to is not known to us. It has given rise to many theories. For accounts of the scholarship on the poem, see Anne L. Klinck, *The Old English Elegies: A Critical Edition and Genre Study* (Montreal, 1992) and Bernard J. Muir, ed., *The Exeter Anthology of Old English Poetry* (Exeter, 1994). Lƿodum is mƿnum swylce him mon lƿc gife; willa hƿy hine aƿecgan gif hƿ on ƿrƿat cyme. Ungelc is s. Wulf is on ege, ic on ƿerre. "Wulf and Eadwacer" is one of the most enigmatic Anglo-Saxon poems. It was called the "First Riddle of Cynewulf" (because it starts the riddle section in the Exeter Book) until it was decided that it was part of a longer story told obscurely. The title was given to it by modern editors who assume that Wulf and Eadwacer are two different men, although that claim has been challenged; it is untitled in the manuscript.

Wulf, my Wulf, it was my hopes of thee, thy constant absence and my mourning heart, that made me sickâ€”not from lack of food. Dost thou hear, Eadwacer? Our wretched cub Wulf will bear to the forest. What never was united is easily torn asunderâ€”our song together. Go to: [\[top of page\]](#) [\[Facsimile\]](#) [\[Text\]](#) [\[Full Breakdown\]](#) [\[StefÃ¡n Einarsson\]](#) [\[Mackie\]](#) [\[Glossary\]](#). Old English vocabulary for Wulf and Eadwacer. "Wulf and Eadwacer" is an Old English poem of famously difficult interpretation. It has been variously characterised, (modernly) as an elegy, (historically) as a riddle, and (in speculation on the poem's pre-history) as a song or ballad with refrain. The poem's complexities are, however, often asserted simply to defy genre classification, especially with regard to its narrative content. The poem's only extant text is found within the tenth-century Exeter Book, along with certain other texts to which... Wulf and Eadwacer: Modern English Translations, Paraphrase, History, Summary and Analysis (an anonymous Old English/Anglo-Saxon poem noted for its ambiguity, circa 960-990 AD). "Wulf and Eadwacer" is one of the truly great poems of English antiquity.Â Have you heard, Eadwacer? Watchdog! A wolf has borne our wretched whelp to the woods. One can easily sever what never was one: our song together. NOTE: I do not claim that my interpretation of this famously ambiguous poem is the "correct" one. "Wulf and Eadwacer" is one of the most enigmatic Anglo-Saxon poems. It was called the "First Riddle of Cynewulf" (because it starts the riddle section in the Exeter Book) until it was decided that it was part of a longer story told obscurely. The title was given to it by modern editors who assume that Wulf and Eadwacer are two different men, although that claim has been challenged; it is untitled in the manuscript.