

Warning Concerning Copyright Restrictions

The copyright law of the United States (Title 17, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyright material. Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specified conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction not be "used for any purposes other than private study, scholarship, or research." If a user makes a request for, or later uses, a photocopy or reproduction for purposes in excess of "fair use," that use may be liable for copyright infringement.

The Wife's Lament

Detailed interpretation of this poem has given a lot of trouble. A woman is speaking, and her story seems to be this: she is compelled to live in an unpleasant place while her husband has been exiled overseas as a result of some crime by her husband connected with his kinsmen, who had been opposed to the woman and her marriage. Even this much is not universally agreed, and it must be admitted that according to any interpretation the speaker appears to have little regard to the chronology of the events described. If however we accept that the above is the general framework, we may tentatively add that ll. 15-17 mean that she is a foreigner. She has come from abroad to marry but her husband's kinsmen disapprove. Despite his cheerful demeanour her husband secretly plans and executes some crime as a result of which he is banished and she condemned to the earth-hall. This is substantially the view of the latest editor, R. F. Leslie, and seems the best. However the word *ærest*, l. 6, remains an objection to this theory.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Kershaw
ASPR III
R. F. Leslie, *Three Old English Elegies*, Manchester, 1961
K. Malone, 'Two English *Frauenlieder*', *Comparative Literature*, XIV, 1962
J. L. Curry, 'Approaches to a Translation of the Anglo-Saxon *The Wife's Lament*', *Medium Ævum*, XXXV, 1966

The Wife's Lament

Ic þis giedd wrece bi mē ful gēomorre,
 mīnre sylfre sið. Ic þæt secgan mæg
 hwæt ic yrmþa gebād, siþþan ic up wēox,
 nīwes oþþe ealdes, nō mā þonne nū.

5 Å ic wite wonn mīnra wræcslþa.
 Ærest mīn hlāford gewāt heonan of lēodum
 ofer yþa gelāc; hæfde ic ūhtceare

hwær mīn lēodfruma londes wære.

Ðā ic mē fēran gewāt folgað sēcan,

10 winelēas wræcca for mīnre wēaþearfe,

ongunnon þæt þæs monnes māgas hycgan

þurh dyrne geþōht þæt h̄y tōdælden unc,

þæt wit gewīdost in woruldrice

lifdon lādlicost; and mec longade.

15 Hēt mec hlāford mīn hēr eard niman;

āhte ic lēofra lýt on þisum londstede,

holdra frēonda; forþon is mīn hyge gēomor.

Ðā ic mē ful gemæcne monnan funde,

heardsæligne, hygegēomorne,

20 mōd mīþendne, morþor hycgendne,

blīþe gebæro. Ful oft wit bēotedan

þæt unc ne gedælde nemne dēað āna,

ōwiht elles; eft is þæt onhworfen,

is nū fornumen swā hit nō wære

25 frēondscipe uncer. Sceal ic feor ge nēah

mīnes felalēofan fāhðu drēogan.

Heht mec mon wunian on wuda bearwe,

The Wife's Lament

I sing this song about myself, full sad,
 My own distress, and tell what hardships I
 Have had to suffer since I first grew up,
 Present and past, but never more than now;
 I ever suffered grief through banishment.
 For since my lord departed from this people
 Over the sea, each dawn have I had care
 Wondering where my lord may be on iand.
 When I set off to join and serve my lord,
 A friendless exile in my sorry plight,
 My husband's kinsmen plotted secretly
 How they might separate us from each other
 That we might live in wretchedness apart
 Most widely in the world: and my heart longed.
 In the first place my lord had ordered me
 To take up my abode here, though I had
 Among these people few dear loyal friends;
 Therefore my heart is sad. Then had I found
 A fitting man, but one ill-starred, distressed,
 Whose hiding heart was contemplating crime,
 Though cheerful his demeanour. We had vowed
 Full many a time that nought should come between us
 But death alone, and nothing else at all.
 All that has changed, and it is now as though
 Our marriage and our love had never been,
 And far or near forever I must suffer
 The feud of my beloved husband dear.
 So in this forest grove they made me dwell,

15. *her eard*, MS *herheard*. This is an important crux, as the meaning given to this half-line affects the interpretation of the whole poem. The main suggestions are: (i) *herheard* is a form of *hearg-eard* meaning 'dwelling in a grove' or 'sanctuary' (see Kershaw p. 173); (ii) divide into *her heard*, taking *heard* either as an adjective meaning 'cruel' (see Kershaw as above) or as a noun; (iii) 't th ond d tr te e ima. — take up an abode'. This proposal gives better sense and interpretation.

THE WIFE'S LAMENT

under āctrēo in þām eorðscræfe.
 Eald is þes eorðsele, eal ic eom oflongad;
 30 sindon dena dimme, dūna uphēa,
 bitre burgtūnas brērum beweaxne,
 wīc wylna lēas. Ful oft mec hēr wrāpe begeat
 fromsīp frēan. Frýnd sind on eorþan,
 lēofe lifgende, leger weardiað,
 35 þonne ic on ūhtan āna gonge
 under āctrēo geond þās eorðscrafu.
 Þær ic sittan mōt sumorlangne dæg,
 þær ic wēpan mæg mīne wræcsīpas,
 earfoþa fela; forþon ic æfre ne mæg
 40 þære mōdceare mīnre gerestan
 ne ealles þæs longapes þe mec on þissum life begeat.
 A scyle geong mon wesan gēomormōd,
 heard heortan geþōht; swylce habban sceal
 blipe gebæro, ēac þon brēostceare,
 45 sinsorgna gedreag; sý æt him sylfum gelong
 eal his worulde wyn. Sý ful wīde fāh
 feorres folclondes þæt mīn frēond siteð
 under stānhlīpe storme behrimed,
 wine wērigmōd, wætre beflōwen
 50 on drēorsele, drēogeð se mīn wine
 mīcle mōdceare; hē gemon tō oft
 wynlicran wīc. Wā bið þām þe sceal
 of langope lēofes ābīdan.

45-7. The gnomic passage from l. 42 is appropriate in the general scheme of the poem, but the relationship of the two 'sý . . .' clauses has given much difficulty. No solution so far offered is convincing. There is probably a major scribal blunder.

THE WIFE'S LAMENT

Under the oak-tree, in this earthy barrow.
 Old is this earth-cave, all I do is yearn.
 The dales are dark with high hills up above,
 Sharp hedge surrounds it, overgrown with briars,
 And joyless is the place. Full often here
 The absence of my lord comes sharply to me.
 Dear lovers in this world lie in their beds,
 While I alone at crack of dawn must walk
 Under the oak-tree round this earthy cave,
 Where I must stay the length of summer days,
 Where I may weep my banishment and all
 My many hardships, for I never can
 Contrive to set at rest my careworn heart,
 Nor all the longing that this life has brought me.
 A young man always must be serious,
 And tough his character; likewise he should
 Seem cheerful, even though his heart is sad
 With multitude of cares. All earthly joy
 Must come from his own self. Since my dear lord
 Is outcast, far off in a distant land,
 Frozen by storms beneath a stormy cliff
 And dwelling in some desolate abode
 Beside the sea, my weary-hearted lord
 Must suffer pitiless anxiety.
 And all too often he will call to mind
 A happier dwelling. Grief must always be
 For him who yearning longs for his beloved.