

promoting access to White Rose research papers



Universities of Leeds, Sheffield and York
<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:

<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/7657/>

Published paper

Hall, Alaric (2002) *The images and structure of The Wife's Lament*. Leeds Studies in English, 33 . pp. 1-29.

The Images and Structure of *The Wife's Lament*

Alaric Hall

The Wife's Lament (hereafter *WfL*) has proved enigmatic for the best part of two centuries, and remains so. But critical perspectives on the poem continue to shift, and shed new light as they do so. For many years, scholars were principally concerned to unpick, through various means, the poem's allusive narrative first half, coping with even such fundamental issues as the number of men to whom *WfL*'s speaker refers. However, most of those who have looked at *WfL* recently have concentrated on its more lyric second half, recognising that ignorance as to why the speaker is where she is, and indeed precisely what she is lamenting, does not deny us the appreciation of that lament's literary force. But it remains the case that the speaker's story is important to that appreciation, and the question of how many men are involved in her story is still fundamental. Michael Lapidge recently viewed the landscape depicted in *WfL*'s second half as 'an object correlative of the speaker's emotions', suggesting that

Those critics who have attempted to visualise the relative positioning of the oak-tree and the cave have been frustrated, for the simple reason that the poet is describing a mental landscape, not a physical one; in its loneliness and desolation it is a visible embodiment of the narrator's invisible grief.¹

Emily Jensen has even argued that

From these literal associations [of *eorðscraef*] we are left with a female speaker in "The Wife's Lament" who is either dead and speaking from the grave or is alive and living in a cave . . . I am not convinced . . . that either occurs in "The Wife's Lament".²

I do not deny the effectiveness of *WfL*'s imagery as a metaphor for the speaker's state

of mind, nor the value of viewing the poem from a 'lyric' perspective. Indeed, focusing on the 'lyric' passage can offer means to help understand the preceding narrative passages: although some have recently been usefully adduced, there are numerous close analogues for the poem's imagery which have yet to be discussed in its context – offering not the literal associations of landscape which Jensen discards, but an approach to the literary ones which, it appears, the Anglo-Saxon audience knew.³ These analogues, I think, can shed considerable light on how we should understand both the imagery of *WfL*, and its narrative.

A further source of evidence for understanding *WfL* is its manuscript context, particularly the manuscript pointing.⁴ Tentative though one must be in reading the Exeter Book's punctuation, this can offer evidence for how we should attempt to read the poem's syntactic and formal structure, giving us perspectives on how we should understand it both in terms of its aesthetics and narrative.

We may frame our understanding of *WfL* as a woman's lament with Anglo-Saxon and English analogues, both verbal and thematic, dating from before and after *WfL*'s extant text. Pre-dating the Exeter Book is the right-hand panel of the Franks Casket, conventionally dated to the eighth century; the depiction on the panel 'has not been interpreted'.⁵ Fiona and Richard Gameson have noted the casket in this connection, but the analogue has yet to receive close consideration.⁶ The panel's inscription was edited by R. I. Page:

Her Hos sitip on harmberga
agl[.] drigip swa hiræ Ertæ gisgraf
sarden sorga and sefa torna.

Page tentatively translated this as 'Here Hos sits on the sorrow-mound; she suffers distress in that Ertæ had decreed for her a wretched den (?wood) of sorrows and torments of mind'. Interpretation is not straightforward – Page himself offers a subtly different alternative, and, for example, Hilda Ellis Davison pointed out that the first six runes could, on textual bases, be read just as well as *herh-os* ('a temple-deity') – but this seems essentially the most plausible explanation.⁷

The image of this inscription immediately resonates with *WfL*'s depiction of a woman who has been commanded to 'wunian on wuda bearwe / under actreo in þam eorðscræfe' ('dwell in a wooded grove / under an oak-tree, in the cave'), and although Page translated 'on harmberga' as 'on the sorrow-mound', it could also mean 'in the sorrow-mound'.⁸ The central scene of the panel is a horse, surrounded by foliage, standing on one side of what appears to be a mound, looking across to the face of a

The Images and Structure of The Wife's Lament

man on the other side. The mound has a small figure inside it. However, on the far left hand side of the panel is a bestial human-figure sitting on a mound. Which mound the inscription refers to is clarified by the fact that each panel of the casket is designed either with an even bipartite division, or the referent of its inscription in the middle. The central figure of the right-hand panel, then, would seem to be Hos – in the sorrow-mound, just like the speaker of *WfL*.

There are a few words besides the main inscription, of which Page's summary should be sufficient: 'Above the horse's back is the word "risci" which ought to mean "rush, reed"; beneath its belly is "wudu", "wood"; over its head is "bita" which may be the name of the horse (Biter) or of the man facing it'.⁹ *Wudu* is of course a further detail which is present in *WfL*, perhaps reflected also in the carved foliage. A less clear link between the two texts is the element *-den*. Neither horse nor any other association with *denn*'s common meaning, 'den, lair (of an animal)', is present in *WfL*.¹⁰ However, *denn* is also twice attested as 'grave' – an ambiguity reminiscent of *WfL*'s *eorðscræf*, which has a meaning of 'grave' secondary to its primary meaning of 'cave'. It is possible, moreover, that *WfL*'s speaker is in a sacred grove, so it is interesting that *denn* is once used to gloss *lucum* ('a wood, grove, or thicket of trees sacred to a deity'), and that there is evidence for the association of horses and sacred groves elsewhere among the Germanic peoples.¹¹ Tacitus in *Germania* chapter 10 associated horses with sacred groves:

proprium gentis equorum quoque praesagia ac monitus experiri.
publice aluntur isdem nemoribus ac lucis, candidi et nullo mortali
opere contacti¹²

[But their [the Germans'] special divination is to make trial of the omens and warnings furnished by horses. In the same groves and coppices are fed certain white horses, never soiled by mortal use.]

A similar association appears in the Eddaic poem *Hlöðskviða*, preserved in *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks konungs*, but reckoned to be among the earliest eddaic poetry: 'var . . . í Húnalandi . . . mari vel tømum / á mörk inni helgu' ('There was . . . in the Hun-Kingdom . . . horse well-broken / in the holy forest').¹³

As Battles has shown, the figure of the female lover being banished, or sent for sanctuary, to a subterranean location also appears in Middle English poetry, in *Sir Tristrem* and, portrayed at greater length than in Wace's *Roman de Brut*, in *Lazamon's Brut*. Tristrem and Ysonde flee from King Mark to an 'erþe house' in a forest; King Lochrine's lover Astrild is installed as his concubine in a luxurious cave outside

London.¹⁴ Battles has chosen to see this figure in rather prosaic terms, noting numerous examples of the use of souterrains for sanctuary in Nordic prose; but its presence on the casket and in *WfL* surely represents a topos, and Hos's *hamberg* seems unlikely to be a souterrain. This combined evidence makes it likely that an Anglo-Saxon audience, presented with a woman in *eorðscræfe*, would immediately have in mind a set of associations of love, banishment, paganism and sanctuary, regardless of any historical use of souterrains.

Middle English poetry also offers a remarkable verbal analogue for *WfL*. Among the earliest surviving Middle English secular lyrics is the well known *chanson d'aventure*, *Nu springes the sprai*, which involves a woman's lament. Its manuscript dates from around 1300. At the end of the first stanza, the lamenting *mai* cries 'Wai es him I louue-l[on]gi[n]ge / Sal libben ai' ('Woe is to the one who must live forever in love-longing').¹⁵ This parallels *WfL* 52b-53, 'wa bið þam þe sceal / of langoþe leofes abidan' ('Woe must be to the one who must / in longing await love/a loved one'). *Nu springes* has a close Old French analogue, but 'Wai es him I louue-l[on]gi[n]ge / Sal libben ai' is unique to the English poem; moreover, taking *-e* in the text to be silent, these lines scan as an Old English alliterative line.¹⁶ It would appear to represent an element of a vernacular English *frauenlied* or 'lover's lament' form, surfacing in the surviving corpus only here and in *WfL*.

Comparable findings have been made by Joseph Harris, looking at earlier Germanic poetry. Harris perhaps put excessive weight on this, arguing for a common Germanic elegiac form, but this emphasis need not detract from some of his observations. He notes that 'The OE poem [*WfL*], like the German one [*Hildebrandslied*], focuses on the deserted woman's dwelling place' (as does the Franks Casket). He also found that 'There seems to be a significant bond . . . between the scene of elegiac discourse and the verb "to sit", which we see in *WfL* 37.'¹⁷ The figure appears in *Wulf and Eadwacer*, of course: 'þonne hit wæs renig weder ond ic reotugu sæt' ('Then it was rainy weather and I sat weeping'). Besides in *Hildebrandslied*, there are several examples in the Poetic Edda, including *Oddrúnargrátr* (stanza 13) and *Guðrúnarhvöt* (stanza 9); there are impersonal and men's instances in *Deor* (lines 24, 28), and the themes of sitting and elegy are also present on the Franks casket. This evidence is a strong indicator that *WfL* is what its text, to modern readers, implies it to be: a vernacular woman's love-lament – though one with a substantial narrative content. It also suggests that intrinsic to the poem's fabric was a network of figures and phrases associated with such a form, invisible outside the vernacular context.

Before trying to reconstruct this context further, however, we must consider whether *WfL* was intended to stand alone, or if it was intended for an audience who

The Images and Structure of The Wife's Lament

already knew the story to which it alludes. One could, in favour of the former idea, invoke the influence of material such as the *Song of Songs*, or Latin love-lyrics represented by the eleventh century Anglo-Saxon *Cambridge Songs* collection.¹⁸ This material contains lovers' laments which seem to allude to a narrative, but which nonetheless are in contexts where there is no such narrative. However, it seems more likely that *WfL*'s audience was expected to know the story; that such stories were in circulation is demonstrated by the Franks Casket. *WfL* line 9, the largely baffling 'þa ic me feran gewat folgað secan' ('Then/when I departed to go to seek (a) *folgað*') might be explicable by Latin influence, but its striking use of *folgað*, which 'appears to have been a legal term in OE, denoting the service due by a retainer to his lord', would be a very odd element to introduce unless in allusion to a known event; and the line can hardly be swept under the carpet, resonating as it does with lines 6 and 18 ('ærest min hlaford gewat heonan of leodum' and 'ða ic me ful gemæcne monnan funde').¹⁹ Two interpretations of the events of line 9 are that the speaker sought the protection afforded by a lord-retainer relationship, or sought a euphemistically described lover; in either case, a measure of special pleading is necessary to get round contextual or semantic problems, and this seems best provided by assuming a narrative known to the poem's intended audience. *WfL*, like many of the lyrical poems of the Poetic Edda, was intended to be understood in a narrative context; and allusion thereto was clearly an important part of the poem.²⁰

Let us look more closely at *WfL*'s lyric imagery. The speaker's environment is depicted in lines 30-32a as

dena dimme duna uphea

bitre burgtunas brerum beweaxne

wic wynna leas

dim dales, tall hills,

bitter *burgtunas* overgrown with briars,

a home without joys.

As I have said, the 'object-correlative' approach to this, whereby the speaker's gloomy surroundings are a pathetic fallacy, is reasonable and useful. 'It could', indeed, 'be said that her mind, like the surrounding valleys is *dimme* and *brerum beweaxne*'.²¹ It is also the case that the briars are unique in surviving Old English poetry. Leslie noted that 'Briars, thorns and brambles are similarly used as elegiac motifs in early Welsh and Irish poetry'; another parallel would be Gawain's description of the Green Chapel in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, line 2190: 'Pis oritore is vgly, with erbez ouergrowen'.²² The evidence for interaction between Anglo-Saxon and Celtic vernacular poetries is slight, and the image can certainly be taken as a polygenetic representation of long-term human abandonment, bearing a pathetic fallacy. On the

other hand, it is at least of interest that the other associations of the Green Chapel – which is a mound in the wilderness, 'hol3 inwith, nobot an olde caue' ('hollow within, just an old cave', line 2182), the 'cosedest kyrk' ('most accursed church', line 2196), and a fitting place for the appearance of the devil (lines 2185-2196) – correlate rather well with other associations which may be established for the description of the speaker's location quoted.

It is important in this context to recognise that images focusing on landbound natural scenes are very rare in Old English poetry; while, nonetheless, line 30 has an Old English analogue in *The Phoenix* lines 21-26. This describes Paradise with, amongst other statements:

| | |
|----------------------------------|--|
| beorgas þær ne muntas | Neither hills nor mountains |
| steape ne stondað ne stan clifu | stand there, steep, nor do stone-cliffs |
| heah hlifiað swa her mid us | tower high, as here among us, |
| ne dene ne dalu ne dun scrafu | nor valleys nor dales nor dim hollows, |
| hlawas ne hlincas ne þær hleonað | mounds nor rises, nor does any rough thing |
| oo unsmeþes wiht | thing lie there. |

All this translates Lactantius's 'Nec tumulus crescit nec cava vallis hiat' ('Neither mound rises nor does hollow valley gape'), and while such expansion is not uncommon in *The Phoenix*, the poet's interest in this scene is still worthy of note.²³ To this comparison may be added the possible connotations of 'wic wynna leas', paralleled later in *WfL* in the speaker's description of her *freond* as remembering a 'wynlicran wic' ('more joyful home'). Phrases comparable to these occur twice elsewhere in the Old English corpus, in *Beowulf* line 821 and *Genesis A* line 928. *Beowulf*'s 'wynleas wic' ('joyless home') refers to Grendel's home, widely supposed to represent a hell-on-earth, and *Genesis*'s 'wynleasran wic' ('more joyless home') describes the world to which Adam, fallen from paradise, is to be banished. Perspectives on *dimme* are offered by Jean Ritzke-Rutherford:

In keeping with the natural psychological and metaphysical associations coupled with light and darkness . . . and firmly anchored in Biblical and homiletic writing, light in OE poetry is equated with good, while darkness stands for evil and even death.²⁴

These parallels to lines 30-32a give us the context in which the speaker's location seems to have been understood – it seems rather precisely to be an anti-paradise,

The Images and Structure of The Wife's Lament

connoting hell. To one person, the lines could have been primarily Christian images; to another, perhaps, traditional images whose Christian associations were secondary; but either way, the essential idea seems clear.

The *bitre burgtunas* have recently been re-examined by P. R. Orton, and there is little point in raking over the various suggestions as to what they may be. Orton chose to read *burg* as 'home', thus 'bitter home-enclosures' ('home' being ironic).²⁵ But to read the compound literally, as 'bitter defence-enclosures', may be perfectly appropriate, if the speaker's unpleasant location is also her sanctuary. Whatever the meaning of the compound, this literal interpretation would work as paronomasia. However, the fact that *Hos* was 'on harmberga', 'in/on a sorrow-hill/barrow', provides an important analogue for the *bitre burgtunas*.²⁶ *Burg* and *be(o)rg* were often confused in Late West Saxon; to cite some poetic examples, *Exodus* uses *burhhleoðu* (line 70) of the wall of water, and *burgum* (line 222) as 'hills', and recent editors read *burghleoþum* in *Riddle 27* (line 2) as 'mountain slopes'.²⁷ 'Bitter barrow-enclosures' is a simple and appropriate reading of *bitre burgtunas*, in a stroke removing the difficulties of the compound and illuminating the character of the *eorðscrafu* in which the speaker situates herself.

It may be that we can improve our understanding of *burgtunas*, moreover, by noting the context which the speaker gives it in lines 15 and 27:

het mec hlaford min her/heard niman My lord commanded me to her/heard niman

heht mec mon wunian on wuda bearwe A person commanded me to dwell in a wooded
grove

Her/heard (crossing a line break in the manuscript) is a notorious crux, and its meaning is important to interpreting *WfL*'s narrative. There is no need to rehearse the debate over its meaning, which is ongoing;²⁸ only to note that an attractive and common reading is *herh-eard*, hypothesising a compound of an Anglian smoothed form of the attested West-Saxon *hearh/le(a)rg*, 'a place sacred to a god, with an idol and an altar . . . a grove', and the construction *eard niman*, 'to take up an abode'.²⁹

One well-known context for a *herg* is that of *Beowulf*, lines 3071-73. The Geats swear

þæt se secg wære synnum scildig that that man should be guilty with sins
hergum geheadærod hellbendum fæst confined to hergs, to fast hell-bonds,
wommum gewitnad se ðone wong tormented with evils, who plundered that

strude³⁰

place.

For these hellish connotations to be found in *WfL* would be wholly consonant with the other evidence regarding the speaker's location. The combination of mound, sacred place and sanctuary is also attested in history, in a runic inscription at Oklunda in Östergötland (southern Sweden). The inscription, apparently dating from the ninth century, was cut on a rock on a knoll.³¹ The latter part of the inscription is obscure, but the opening reads: **kunar : fapirunarþisar : insa flausakar : sutiupita**. That is, *Gunnarr faði runar þessar. En sa flo sakr. Sotti vi þetta . . .*, translated by Jansson (himself translated by Foote) to mean 'Gunnar cut these runes. And he fled under penalty. Sought this sanctuary. . .'.³² Southern Sweden was geographically distant from Anglo-Saxon England, but the lands were culturally close, both in origin, and as part of the North Sea littoral. Indeed, on the evidence of *Beowulf*, the eyes of Anglo-Saxon poets were fastly on that region.

These considerations, then, may inform us about the general location of the speaker of *WfL*. Her remaining comments on her abode stress two further elements: the *actreo* and the *eorðscraef*, first mentioned in line 28, and then reiterated in 36, both times in clear association. It is very hard to dismiss this as Lapidge's 'mental landscape' – it is too specific and its implications as a 'visible embodiment of the narrator's invisible grief' too obscure. As I have already suggested, it is also hard to understand it by Battles's literal approach: 'Some critics have read this [*herheard*] as an indication that the structure is a pagan shrine, but there is a more humbly realistic reason why the narrator might emphasise the trees, namely because they are dominant features of the landscape surrounding her dwelling'.³³ This may be so; but she does not emphasise the trees, but rather *an oaktree*, under which the *eorðscraef* lies. So let us explore the literary associations of these elements, and their coupling.

The semantics of *eorðscraef* have been extensively studied, so I shall not go over them again here.³⁴ The speaker also refers to the place with 'eald is þes eorðsele' ('this earth-hall is old'). The character of an *eorðsele* has been considered by Hume, who found the 'earth-hall' here to be an 'anti-hall' – it thus behaves contrariwise to the hall in Old English poetry, which represents 'a circle of light and peace enclosed by darkness, discomfort and danger' and 'the social system associated with it'.³⁵ *Eald* must have been meant to add to or modify these associations. Leslie argued that the word implies the *eorðsele* to be man-made, and the *eorðsele* in *Beowulf* (the word's only other attestation) and Tristrem's *erpe house* are both portrayed as the products of a civilisation long past and mysterious: 'Etenes bi old dayn / Had wrouzt it' ('Giants in old days had made it'; cf. *Beowulf* lines 2717b-2719).³⁶ Significantly, both poems

The Images and Structure of The Wife's Lament

emphasise hereby the caves' pre-Christian origins. The speaker's cave in *WfL* seems, then, to be not any old anti-hall, but one with a concise pointer to these further associations, of the hellish, and the time before Christianity.

The collocation of the *actreo* and *eorðscraef* would remain obscure, but for their striking analogues, not only from Nordic prose and Middle English, but the Bible and the Poetic Edda; though, admittedly, *WfL* is the only instance where precisely these two elements are specifically combined, so interpreting the collocation must remain difficult. S. A. J. Bradley has observed that 'The oak . . . is confined mainly to the Old Testament, where it is regularly associated with sanctuaries, altars and graves, or symbolises worldly splendour humbled in the day of the Lord's retribution'.³⁷ 'Regularly associated' is excessive – there are, for example, only two instances of graves at oak trees (Genesis 35. 8; I Chronicles 10. 12), though cave-burials are also found (e.g. Genesis 49. 29). Even so, all the associations Bradley lists are present, some fitting particularly well into the context of *WfL*. Ezekiel 6. 13 says that

fuerint interfecti vestri in medio idolorum vestrorum in circuitu ararum vestrarum in omni colle excelso in cunctis summitatibus montium et subtus omne lignum nemorosum et subtus universam quercum frondosam locum ubi accenderunt tura redolentia universis idolis suis³⁸

[your slain men will have been among your idols, round about your altars on every high hill, in all the tops of mountains and beneath every leafy tree and beneath every leafy oak, the place where they offered pungent incense to all their idols.]

Caves also feature widely in the Old Testament as dwellings and places of escape; indeed, when Lot flees Zoar to dwell in a cave (Genesis 19. 30), *Genesis A* uses *eorðscraef* (line 2597). Oak-trees could also be associated with legitimate altars (e.g. Joshua 24. 26), but otherwise these references demonstrate a similar range of associations to those which we might already suppose in *WfL* – of pagan religion, and refuge. An audience with no more than a knowledge of *Genesis* could have perceived the location of *WfL*'s speaker largely in Biblical terms to be associated with damnable ways of life, though, that said, I see no reason to seek here distinct 'pagan' or 'Christian' layers in *WfL*: each may have taken on elements of the other, in the poetic tradition, or in individual members of the poem's audience.

The possibility of a direct line of Biblical influence on Old English poetry is clear.³⁹ Comparisons between Old English poetry and the Poetic Edda are more

hazardous. Even so, links are clear – verbally, for example, between *The Seafarer* (lines 72-73) and *The Wanderer* (lines 108-09) and *Hávamál* (stanzas 76-77); and thematically, perhaps most strikingly, between *Deor* (1-13), the Franks Casket and *Völundarkviða*.⁴⁰ How far such connections should be perceived as being cognate, and how far due to later sharing of ideas between the Anglo-Saxons and the Scandinavians is a significant consideration; but the presence of links remains sure, and hopefully sufficient for the present purpose.

In the *Poetic Edda*, subterranean locations are associated with prophetesses and giantesses, and also with death (*Völuspá* stanza 66, *Baldur's Draumar* 2, *Hyndluljóð* 1 and *Helreið Brynhildar* 1, 3, 14). More strikingly, the analogues also associate places of death with the roots of a tree, twice with regard to giantesses. One, as Orton pointed out, is *Skírnismál*. In the course of thirteen stanzas of threats which Skírnir extends in his attempts to woo Gerðr for Freyr, Skírnir suggests that

Ara þúfo á
scaltu ár sitia,
horva heimi ór,
snugga heliar til

On an eagle's mound
you shall sit from early morning,
looking out of the world,
hankering towards hell

Hrímgrímnir heitir þurs,
er þic hafa scal,
fyr nágrindr neðan;
þar þér vílmegir
á viðar rótom
geita hland gefi!
(Stanzas 27, 35)⁴¹

Hrimgrimir is the name of the giant
who'll have you
down below the corpse-gates,
where bondsmen will give you
at the roots of the wood
goat's piss to drink.

Another parallel is provided by *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar* stanza 16, in which Atli curses the giantess Hríngerðr:

níu røstom
er þú scyldir neðarr vera,
oc vaxi þér á baðmi barr!

You ought to be nine leagues
underground
with fir-trees growing from your breast!

Much the same association occurs in *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*. Hervör goes to the burial mound of her father Angantýr, declaring

The Images and Structure of The Wife's Lament

Vek ek yör alla
undir víðar rótum.⁴²

From the roots of the tree
I arouse you all

The associations of trees and the subterranean in the Poetic Edda seem to be death, and curses upon females; and their own nature implies that the topos has pagan associations. Admittedly, the females in question are rarely human, and it is the trees' roots which are emphasised, but presumably the analogy with Old English poetry stands – the associations are quite consonant with the material from the Franks Casket. Combining the Biblical material and previous discussions, we may tentatively suppose that in *WfL* the speaker's location was envisaged as caves within a burial mound, or at least a mound to which the poem is trying to give connotations of death, surrounded by an enclosure which is overgrown with briars. The place had associations with paganism, set in a dim landscape of almost hellish grimness. As Ritzke-Rutherford has said, 'If the greatest joy of poets and Christians is the brightness of Paradise, the greatest loss of the damned is to be cut off from that light'.⁴³

But none of this quite accounts for *WfL*'s insistence upon an *actreo*. Unfortunately, there is only one comparable Eddaic instance of an oak-tree, which Kershaw adduced from stanza six of the Flateyjarbók text of *Helreið Brynhildar*:⁴⁴

Lét mig af harmi
hugfullr konungr
Atla systur
undir æik búa⁴⁵

In sorrow the courageous king
made me,
the sister of Atli,
to dwell beneath an oak

along with its generally preferred memorial variant from the *Codex Regius*,

Lét hami vára
hugfullr konungr,
átta systra,
undir eic borit

The wise king had our
magic garments –
eight sisters we were together –
put under an oak.

In contrast with the material of the Franks Casket, this seems to point towards the speaker's oak-tree as primarily a place of sanctuary, rather than banishment – though, of course, the two phenomena may be closely associated, in both narrative and emotional terms. Likewise, sanctuary is the principal force of Battles's Nordic analogues, and, as it seems to me, his Middle English analogues too.

These analogues are crucial to interpreting *WfL*'s narrative. Banishment might

obviously be explained by adultery, if ingenuity overcomes the suggestion that both *hlaforð* and *mon* would seem to banish the speaker to the same place; whereas placing the speaker in sanctuary would be more simply understood as the deed of one, concerned, husband.⁴⁶ Admittedly, the lost story is not guaranteed to have been as simple as these suggestions imply; but to aim for simplicity is a sound policy from which to start. *WfL*'s predominantly narrative first half, wherein further perspectives on this problem can be found, is hard to interpret, and debate as to how the poem should be verse-paraphrased, its sentences divided, and their sequence interpreted, fill its critical history. As an example, let us note lines 9-11:

ða ic me feran gewat folgað secan
 wineleas wræcca for minre weapearfe-
 ongunnon þæt þæs monnes magas hycgan

Should *ða* here be taken to imply 'When on account of my woeful plight I went wandering, a friendless exile, to find a following, the man's kindred plotted . . .', or 'Then I set out on my way, friendless and homeless to seek for support in my sore need. // The man's relatives had secretly cast about . . .'⁴⁷ This is a problem to which I shall return.

WfL's larger structure is likewise problematical, but there are two points of consensus. One is the discreteness of lines 1-5, defined by the aural envelope of *wrece* . . . *sið* (lines 1-2) and *wræcsipa* (line 5); the fact that the first four lines are a syntactic and thematic unit, with 5 a complimentary gnomic statement; and the contrast between the present tenses of 1-5 and the preterites which follow. Scholars also agree that 42-53 are a unit. They end with *langope*, which parallels *longapes* in 41; and they comprise a shift from the speaker's (indicative) description of her own present situation, to some kind of (partly subjunctive) portrayal of *geong mon*, *min freond*, enveloped by two gnomes. With these divisions, however, consensus ends. To survey three interpretations: Richard Hamer grouped lines 6-26 and 27-41; S. A. J. Bradley divided this further, into 6-14, 15-26 and 27-41; while R. F. Leslie, perhaps wisely, avoided crystallising the structure by allowing the text numerous divisions: 6-14, 15-17, 18-26, 27-29 and 30-41, interpreted by D. R. Howlett to imply 'a prologue of five lines (1-5) and four sections of twelve lines'.⁴⁸

One approach to reading *WfL*'s structure which does not demand the prejudging of the lost narrative is to examine aurally and semantically interrelating lines, as did Jane L. Curry, though she did not push her observations as far as she might.⁴⁹ But another is to adduce the poem's manuscript punctuation. This is not, of course, a

The Images and Structure of The Wife's Lament

simple matter – the pointings of the Exeter Book seem to be used in a bewildering variety of syntactic contexts, but are clearly not intended merely to mark the metre as they do in the Junius manuscript, being too infrequent. Even so, an understanding of the punctuation can be approached. Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe offered as a hypothetical general principle, 'a point means a pause. Use whenever necessary'.⁵⁰ M. B. Parkes, in a wider context, has also argued that 'Medieval scribes and correctors punctuate where confusion is likely to arise . . . and do not always punctuate where confusion is not likely to arise'.⁵¹ Pointings fall in *WfL* lines 8, 10, 14, 17, 22, 28, 29, 37 and 40. Apart from that in 37, they each fall at the end of a b-verse. The majority could be read as modern full stops, though not those in 22, 37, and 40, which should be considered first.

Line 37 runs 'þær ic sittam mot sumorlangne· dæg' ('There I may sit the summer-long day'). The pointing here is hard to attribute to anything other than a mistake. It might be explained by the fact that *-langne* is written over an erasure, which has left a large gap after the word, into which the scribe might have inserted the point by way of a space-filler, or mark of error. Whatever its interpretation, however, it seems unlikely to bear on how we should read the line.

The point in line 22 may be considered in the context of 21b-23:

| | |
|------------------------------------|---|
| ful oft wit beotedan | Often indeed the two of us vowed |
| þæt unc ne gedælde nemne deað ana· | that nothing should part us except death alone· |
| owiht elles eft is þæt onhworfen | nothing else. Again has it changed |

O'Keeffe has suggested that the Exeter Book punctuation lacks a 'system', being instead 'text-specific', based on a 'rhetorical understanding'.⁵² This is reasonable, but probably not entirely true. The point in line 22 is probably explicable as one of several occasions in the codex where a parenthetical half-line at the end of a sentence (here *owiht elles*) is preceded by a point, as in *Vainglory* lines 64-65, *Judgement Day I* lines 1-2, and, to quote, *The Seafarer* 79-80:

| | |
|--------------------------------|--|
| awa to ealdre ecan lifes blæd· | for ever and ever the glory of eternal life· |
| dream mid duge/pum dagas sind | joy among companies. Days have |
| gewitene ⁵³ | departed |

The point at the end of line 40 seems simply to be a rhetorical pause without the finality of a full stop:

| | |
|---|---|
| forþon ic æfte ne mæg | Therefore I can never |
| þære modceare minre gerestan· | rest from that spirit-trouble of mine· |
| ne ealles þæs longapes þe mec on þissum | nor from all the longing which (has) seized |
| life begeat | me in this life |

Of the other pointings, several coincide with aurally resonant lines, emphasising O'Keefe's linking of the pointings with rhetorical pauses. Lines 9 and 18, which parallel the verse-paragraph opening in 6, follow points; likewise, line 14's *longade*, seen elsewhere in *WfL* to be an ending-word, is immediately followed by a point. Line 29, 'eald is þes eorðsele eal ic eom oflongad' ('This earth-hall is old; I suffer longing throughout myself'), is followed by a point, and can be read as a conclusive line, especially given its gnomic tone.

Reading these points as something like full stops, the text can be seen to demarcate the episodic progression of lines 6-17. Reading the points thus, and assuming that the episodes are in chronological order (they open, after all, with *ærest*, followed in the next section by *ða*), difficulty in interpreting, for example, lines 9-11 (quoted above), is apparently resolved, the pointing dividing 9-10 from 11 and following. The speaker's lord departed and she suffered *uhtceare* ('troubles in the twilight-before-dawn') over his whereabouts. Then she set off because of her *weapearf* (woeful-need). *Þæs monnes* ('that person's') kinsmen began to plot that the two be parted; and *mec longade* ('and I suffered longing'). Her lord commanded her to *herheard niman*; *forþon is min hyge geomor* ('therefore is my heart sorrowful').

It is possible to push the evidence of pointing further. At the end of line 17 (*forþon is min hyge geomor*), with the ends of the metrical and manuscript lines almost coinciding, the scribe placed 17's point squarely in the middle of the eleven millimetres left to him, and wrote *ða*, the first word of line 18, on the next line. Admittedly, *ða* as written covers a centimetre, so one cannot make too much of the detail; but the manuscript's declaration of a break after line 17 remains visually striking. This emphasises Howlett's passing suggestion that, in our text of *WfL*, the verse-paragraph following the prologue was intended to be read as 6-17 – twelve lines – and that one can read 6-53 as four twelve-line verse-paragraphs. Line 29, the last of the second twelve-line group, happens also to be the last line on the recto, ending with the manuscript line. The break at 42 is, as I have described, evident enough without punctuation. Aurally, this arrangement is effective. It divides the poem into stanzas of past tense – past tense – present tense – present tense. Line 15's *Het mec hlaford . . .* parallels line 27's *heht mec mon . . .*, each introducing a three-line coda to its stanza. The two lists characterising a *mon* (lines 18-21a and 42-45b) may now

The Images and Structure of The Wife's Lament

be read each to comprise the first four lines of a verse-paragraph.⁵⁴

Admittedly, however, this sort of stanzaic form is not the norm for the surviving Old English poetry. In a way, this supports the reading: a scribe has inserted pointings where the unusualness of the form might confuse the reader. However, with our uncertainty regarding the intended functions of the pointings, some other evidence is required. Certainly, *WfL* is not stanzaic in the same way that *Deor* is, with its irregular stanzas, each opened with a capital and concluded with a gnomic refrain and heavy manuscript punctuation. Nor is it much like the *Rune Poem*, with its 3- and 4-line stanzas. But a strong comparison is afforded by *The Wanderer*, which has a five-line introduction ending with a gnomic phrase, and can be read in four very nearly equal sections (lines 1-29a; 29b-57; 58-84; 85-115).⁵⁵ *The Wanderer* includes its introduction in its count, but is nonetheless closely analogous to the structure of *WfL* which I read.

This reading again has implications for our understanding of the story to which the speaker alludes. It may help to crystallise the meaning of *ða* in line 18, 'ða ic me ful gemæcne monnan funde' ('ða I found myself a fully matched person') – 'then' or 'when'? In simpler circumstances than those of *WfL*, one would assume 'when', as the placing of the verb at the end of a phrase is usually associated with subordinate clauses.⁵⁶ If line 18 were to be associated with the episodic progression that has gone before, by dividing the verse-paragraphs later, or, say, at line 15, then it might best be included as a 'then', perhaps giving a scheme like this: 'first my lord departed . . . then I set out . . . relatives began to consider . . . my lord commanded me to dwell . . . then I found myself a fully matched person . . .'. But the stanzaic structure favours 'when'. The narrative scheme of stanza one, starting with the lord's departure and ending with the speaker's banishment, concludes. The narrator then focuses on her relationship with her *hlaford*, starting 'when' 'ic me ful gemæcne monnan funde'. This eliminates the difficulty which may be had in perceiving one character to be referred to so contrastively as both *hlaford* and *mon* – assuming that both parties had to meet before they could enter the relationship whereby the man should be a *hlaford*, then the speaker can do little but refer to him as a *mon* at this contrastively early juncture in her story.⁵⁷

According to this reading, one can consider *WfL*'s prologue a stanza-by-stanza synopsis of the rest of the poem.⁵⁸ Here is the prologue in full:

| | | |
|---------------------|--------------------|--|
| Ic þis giedd wrece | bi me ful geomorre | I declare this poem about myself |
| minre sylfre sið | Ic þæt secgan mæg | completely sad, my self's journey. I can say it, |
| hwæt ic yrmþa gebad | sippan ic up weox | what I have experienced of hardships since I |

| | | |
|-------------------|----------------|--|
| niwes oppe ealdes | no ma þonne nu | grew up, <i>niwes oppe ealdes</i> , no more than now. |
| a ic wite wonn | minra wræcsipa | Always must I suffer the torment of my exile- journeys. |

The declarations that the speaker is *ful geomorre*, and that she means to speak *minre sylfre sið*, tell the audience that she is a woman, but prompt them to wonder why she is *geomor*, and what has been her *sið*. Accordingly, in the first stanza (6-17), she answers them, with the story of her misfortunes. 'Forþon', she explains, 'is min hyge geomor'. In stanza two (18-29) she becomes more specific, as in lines 2b-4a. The implications of 'sippan ic up weox' are unclear; it could simply mean 'since I grew up', but it could plausibly be a euphemism for her marriage.⁵⁹ Either way, it points to a time of or before the speaker's union with her *hlaford*, thus before the events of stanza one. 'Niwes oppe ealdes' is a slightly odd formulation – *niwra oppe ealdra* ('new or old') would have been the more obvious way of qualifying *yrmþa gebad*. As it stands, the phrase could be read to mean 'of a new man or an old man'. However, I would read it as an adverbial phrase meaning 'recently or of old'.⁶⁰ Genitives are almost certainly adverbial in *londes* in line 8 and in *feorres folclondes* in lines 46b-47a, so there is nothing intrinsically unlikely about the adverbial reading.⁶¹ 'Niwes oppe ealdes' ties in with the second stanza: lines 24-25a, 'is nu swa hit no wære / freondscipe uncer' ('the friendship of the two of us / is now as though it never were') points with *nu* towards the recent past; while line 18, 'ða ic me ful gemæcne monnan funde' ('when I found myself a fully matched man'), I would argue, implies a more distant past. This is then contrasted with a statement of the speaker's present – in the introduction with 'no ma þonne nu' ('no more than now'), and in the poem with the third stanza (30-41), the vivid vignette of how things *sindon* ('are'). Finally, the introduction makes its gnomic declaration of 'a ic wite wonn minra wræcsipa' ('I have always suffered the torment of my exile-journeys'), paralleled by the gnomic lines in stanza four (42-53), which, though not explicitly regarding the speaker, implicitly represent her feelings.

Combining these considerations, then – punctuation, structure, and analogues – I should like finally to re-examine the second half of the poem, the third and fourth stanzas. I have examined above stanza three's portrayal of the speaker's location; elsewhere in the stanza, the speaker concentrates less on her location and more on her feelings, and the poetry, for a modern reader, seems to speak more for itself. This is perhaps deceptive – it is likely that the Anglo-Saxon audience could recognise and appreciate the speaker's adoption of appropriate elegiac (indeed perhaps women's elegiac) postures, as in *sittam* in lines 37-38:

The Images and Structure of The Wife's Lament

| | | |
|-------------------|------------------|--|
| þær ic sittam mot | sumorlangne· dæg | There I may sit the summer-long· day |
| þær ic wepan mæg | mine wræcsipas | There I am able to weep (for) my exile- journeys. |

Jensen has argued that with the turning of its thoughts to other lovers in 'frynd sind on eorþan / leofe lifgende leger weardiað' in lines 33b-34, and the motion implied in 'þonne ic on uhtan ana gonge / under actreo geond þas eorðscrafu' ('then I wander alone in the twilight-before-dawn / under an oaktree throughout these caves') in lines 35-36, the speaker's mind frees itself from the machinations of external forces, leading in stanza four to a 'mind in control of itself, able to "resist its surroundings"' – only without 'the philosophic overlay of *Sfr* [*The Seafarer*] or *Wan* [*The Wanderer*]'.⁶² Jensen's reading is not unattractive. Kershaw noted regarding 'sumorlangne· dæg' that 'Imelmann believes that a contrast to *uhtan* is intended'.⁶³ This, read in conjunction with the earlier *dimme*, implies a progression from night to day, and dark into light. However, other considerations militate against the reading. In the first place, 'Frynd sind on eorþan . . .' is not to be taken unquestioningly to mean 'friends are on the earth, / living beloved they lie in beds' (as Jensen takes it), since it could also mean 'friends are in the earth, / beloved while living, they lie in graves'. Critics of *WfL* have consistently taken one or the other of these readings, as Jensen does, and ignored the alternative possibility, despite the fact that both interpretations have been in publication since 1859.⁶⁴ However, the uncertainty seems now to have been resolved: Kathryn A. Lowe's detailed semantic and syntactic study has shown that the reading which Jensen chooses here is in fact implausible, and that the line must mean, to quote her translation, 'There are friends, dear ones dwelling in the earth, they inhabit graves'.⁶⁵ I have emphasised the likely associations of caves under trees, while Jensen herself recognises that *on uhtan* is a 'conventional image of . . . the time when one's sorrow is at its peak'; moreover, wandering seems also to be an elegiac motif.⁶⁶ This combination, then, seems unlikely to have symbolised a progression towards stoicism to a vernacular audience. Far more striking to my mind is the characterisation in the ironic use of *motan* and *magan* in lines 37-38 – a tone of bitterness and anger which is not philosophical, but does toughen a lament which could have become self-pitying.

The speaker ends this verse-paragraph with lines 39b-41:

| | |
|---|---|
| forþon ic æfre ne mæg | Therefore I can never |
| þære modceare minre gerestan· | rest from that spirit-trouble of mine· |
| ne ealles þæs longapes þe mec on þissum | nor from all the longing which (has) seized |
| life begeat | me in this life |

The last line is desperately crowded – its b-line contains the largest number of initial unstressed syllables apparently permitted in Old English metre, all of which are short and none of which except perhaps *mec* has even very great lexical stress to slow the line down.⁶⁷ The line contains significant extra-metrical alliteration and assonance, on *p*, *l*, and *ea*, and is apparently emphasised by the punctuation. While caution is required in making assumptions about Old English rhetorical style, this line certainly does not seem calm, and can easily be supposed to be desperate.

It is after this that the speaker's thoughts really turn outwards, for the last passage of the poem (lines 42-53). Now she considers the situation of another person. The stanza begins with

| | | |
|----------------------|---------------------|--|
| a scyle geong mon | wesan geomormod | Always must a young person be sad-minded, |
| heard heortan gēpoht | swylce habban sceal | hard the heart's thought, likewise must (he) |
| blīpe gebæro | eac þon breostceare | have a blithe demeanour, moreover heart- |
| sinsorgna gedreag | | trouble, a multitude of continual-sorrows |

Line 42 is a gnomic line – *geong mon* could be any young person. 42-45b is mainly of A-rhythms, with markedly more lexical stresses than metrical, and a high ratio of lexically stressed syllables to unstressed, and of long syllables to short. It seems steady, in marked contrast to line 41. The parallel passage of lines 18-21a runs

| | | |
|----------------------|-----------------|--|
| ða ic me ful gemæcne | monnan funde | When I found myself a fully matched man, |
| heardsælgne | hygegeomorne | ill-blessed, sad-minded, |
| mod miþendne | morþor hycgende | (his) heart dissembling, thinking on violent |
| blīpe gebæro | | death, with blithe demeanour |

Comparing these passages suggests that the speaker means lines 42-45b to apply particularly to the 'ful gemæcne monnan', and gives us an insight into his character: the speaker's demands in 42-45a, compared with the description earlier, in 18-21a, imply a fairly subtle distinction between how the *mon* is and how he should be. Given that the *mon* is *gemæcne*, that 42 is gnomic, and that the descriptions resonate with the speaker's description of herself as *geomorre*, they must apply to her as well as her *mon*. But perhaps more revealing are the changes between the two passages. In 18-21a, an ostensibly optimistic start is undercut in a barrage of adjectives and participles; but in 42-45a, the pace is steady, the understanding extended from the descriptive to the prescriptive, 'mod miþendne morþor hycgende' exorcised. 'Blīpe gebæro' is now perhaps representative more of stoicism than dissembling. Likewise,

The Images and Structure of The Wife's Lament

the final gnomic line of the poem seems to imply a character with this sort of control: it has an steadily logadoeic rhythm, both in terms of length and stress. Although it was presumably not composed specifically for *W/L*, it has been selected for the job, and its character is therefore significant. The last phrase, 'wa bið þam þe sceal / of langope lofes abidan' (lines 52b-53) would appear emotive, but not the cry of one completely overcome – the speaker is becoming wiser (though not resigned). Between these gnomic passages, however – lines 42-45a, and lines 52b-53 – the syntax of the stanza becomes debatable, in lines 45b-52a. Quite how we should understand this is an issue I consider below, so the translation I offer is a possibility conforming to the interpretation I shall argue:

| | |
|---|--|
| sy æt him sylfum gelong | whether all his worldly joy is |
| eal his worulde wyn sy ful wide fah | belonging to himself or whether it is that, |
| feorres folclondes þæt min freond siteþ | outcast everywhere in a far country, my friend |
| under stanhlípe storme behrimed | sits, under a stone-cliff, frosted by storm, |
| wine werigmod wætre beflown | a spirit-worn friend surrounded by water |
| on dreorsele dreogeð se min wine | in a sorrow/gore-hall, that friend of mine |
| micle modceare he gemon to oft | suffers great spirit-trouble, he recalls too |
| wynlicran wic | often a more joyful home. |

It seems remarkable that the stanza contains no punctuation at all. Given the suggestion by Parkes noted above, this absence would seem to imply that the vernacular audience found the stanza's rhetorical structure transparent. I favour, therefore, a reading which invokes the minimum of syntactic complexity and disjunction. This policy disfavors an interpretation of lines 45b-47a like Hamer's 'All earthly joy / Must come from his own self. Since my dear lord / Is outcast . . .'.⁶⁸ Recent opinion has tended strongly towards reading these lines as a 'whether . . . or' construction, rather than taking *sy* as an imperative; and a priori, 'sy æt him sylfum gelong / eal his worulde wyn' seems an odd curse, especially in what otherwise seems to be a non-Christian context. Moreover, the 'whether . . . or . . .' reading demands no syntactic break as great as a modern full stop between 42 and 52b.⁶⁹

It is also unclear whether the *þæt* clause is dependent on both *sy* clauses, or only the second (which is how I have taken it above). However, we might improve our understanding of the syntax by looking at the content of the *þæt* clause. Klinck, in her edition of the Old English elegies, called the content of lines 47b-51a 'a vague dismal location'.⁷⁰ But far stronger and more specific associations may have been recalled by the passage. The situation seems much like the 'Cliff of Death' topos

identified by Fry: the 'motif includes four basic elements: cliffs, serpents, darkness, and deprivation, and occasionally wolves and wind'.⁷¹ The Cliff of Death was associated with hell, as in *Judith* 111b-21, which, in a description absent from the Latin original, describes the departure of Holofernes's spirit; or St. Paul's vision of hell, described in Blickling Homily XVI.⁷² Comparisons with the portrayals of Hel in *Völuspá* and *Snorra Edda*, which connect closely with the 'Cliff of Death' topos, are also possible, but the Christian ones seem distinct enough for the present purpose.⁷³ I have already mentioned the apparent hellish connotations of *wynlicran wic*. Moreover, as Schaefer pointed out, the description also recalls Matthew 7. 26-27:⁷⁴

et omnis qui audit verba mea haec et non facit ea similis erit viro stulto qui aedificavit domum suam supra harenam et descendit pluvia et venerunt flumina et flaverunt venti et inruerunt in domum illam et cecidit et fuit ruina eius magna

[And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act accordingly will be like the foolish man who built his home on the sand; and the rains fell and the floods came and the winds blew and beat upon that home, and it collapsed, and great was its downfall.]

These analogues suggest for us the extremity of the nadir threatening the *wine*, whether read through Old English poetry or the Bible: it is more than a 'dismal location' which he seems to face. They also suggest that the clause is dependent only on 'sy ful wide fah' and following. Not only does 'sy æt him sylfum gelong eal his worulde wyn' ostensibly say 'whether things are going well for him', but even if it *did* imply ill, it would be very hard to interpret it to govern the *þæt* clause while still having it contrast with *sy ful wide fah* . . . as 'whether . . . or' demands.

Alain Renoir has suggested that the *wine* has suffered a

catastrophic inversion . . . in his condition. Thus considered, the process reads like an illustration of the familiar New Testament assertion that the Lord "deposuit potentes de sede . . ." . . . apprehension thereof must unavoidably affect the impact of the narrative on a Christian audience.⁷⁵

The Images and Structure of The Wife's Lament

The speaker may also be implying a different kind of catastrophe. Given the hellish appearance of the *wine's* prospect in 46b-50a, and the curious expression of 45a-46a, perhaps the speaker is essentially saying 'whether he is alive, or dead (such that . . .), my friend suffers'. 'Wa bið þam þe sceal / of langope leofes abidan' ('Woe must be to the one who must / in longing await love/a loved one'), and a man in hell must *abidan* forever – just as, the speaker feels, she must. Her indirect expression of her *langop* allows her to impart to it the force of analogy with the eternal torments of hell, without risking bathos. For a Christian audience, these associations may again have thrown *WfL* and the woes it depicts into the context of a pagan time.⁷⁶

It seems to me most likely that there is only one man in *WfL*: the principal force of the comparatively full Biblical, Middle English, and Norse prose analogues is to imply that the speaker's location is a sanctuary, and there is no need to suppose two men to have sent her there. The cultural and chronological proximity of the Franks Casket analogue means that implications of banishment cannot be dismissed; but such connotations may manifest themselves quite easily as a strong secondary aspect to a primary implication of sanctuary. This reading is supported if one is to consider line 18 to start with 'when', as seems most likely if it is the opening of a verse-paragraph, as it would imply the *mon* and *hlaford* to be identical, rather than different as 'then' in that position would tend to suggest. This would appear also to open up *WfL's* central dynamic: the tensions between a woman's desire to be with her *hlaford*, and his command that she should be in sanctuary; and between her affection for him and her bitterness that she has been forced from him.

The speaker's character is drawn thoroughly and with sympathy. 'Ful oft wit beotedan / þæt unc ne gedælde nemne deað ana / owiht elles' ('Often indeed the two of us vowed / that nothing should part us except death alone / nothing else') is an image of impetuous young lovers – but the *beot*, to take 'eft is þæt onhworfen' with these lines as well as those following, had to change, since something other than death has separated them; and we have the disillusionment of age. Not only the character's longing, but her bitterness, is worked into the persona's voice; and indeed, it has a voice, distinct in the second stanza, in which the speaker uses both 21a and 23b polysemically as pivots between passages. We see a resilient mind, to which age's wider perspective on the world is emerging in the last stanza.

As for the reasons for this separation, 11-12 (the actions of 'þæs monnes magas') and 25b-27 ('sceal ic feor ge neah / mines felaleofan fæhðu dreogan'; 'I must, far or near, / suffer the blood-feud of my much-beloved') are probably all the narrative we will have; but we also have hints in the *mon's* apparently flawed character. Bray's idea that 'The poets [of *WfL* and *Canu Heledd*] use the lamentation to foreground the

failure of martial, heroic ideals to those who are neither warriors nor chieftains' is useful; but in both cases, we might also have, and perhaps have more prominently, criticism of those who do not achieve those ideals: after all, 'beorn sceal gebidan þonne he beot spriced' ('A man must bide his time when he speaks a vow'; *The Wanderer* line 70).⁷⁷ It appears that the speaker's *hlaford* has, in heroic terms, failed her; though given that he is 'ful gemæcne', she may not be without fault herself. He has, perhaps, failed in other ways too, and this conceivably provides a context for his *fæhðu*. The closest we can come to understanding 9-10 may be to guess that the speaker attempted to follow when 'min hlaford gewat heonan of leodum', ('my lord departed, hence from the people(s)'), 'folgað secan' perhaps in wry allusion to violence unknown to us, or to her own exilic state, normally associated with lordless men. At some point in her endeavours, 'þæs monnes magas' attempted to prevent her; and he sent her into sanctuary. Focusing on the worse possibility for his existence, the speaker seems pessimistic about its outcome. She loves him very well – but also sees that he has brought his fate upon himself, and that she is sharing the consequences. The sympathy she might extend to him can only be tempered by the wracking experience she is enduring.

The situations of the speaker and her *freond* are, then, neither merely gloomy landscapes, nor purely pathetic fallacy: they involve distinct motifs, possibly including 'women's/lovers' lament' figures, describing environments with images not only of misery, but also, it seems, inversions of the paradisaical – images of the hellish. We can read these images simply as traditional *topoi*; but might also view them from a Christian perspective, whereby the pagan associations of the speaker's environment intensify its terror. It seems likely enough that both readings could have been found among an Anglo-Saxon audience – even a wholly Christian audience. A more particular perspective on the Anglo-Saxon reading of *WfL* is also available in the poem's manuscript punctuation. Precisely in what ways the Exeter Book's pointings should be interpreted remains uncertain; but their evidence again offers us a chance to refine our understanding of the poem, if we can understand that evidence: the neglected voice of an Old English speaker, or speakers, can be brought to bear on long-standing questions of syntactic, formal, and therefore narrative division, to improve our understanding of *WfL* as a cultural and historical artefact, and, hopefully, as a poem.⁷⁸

The Images and Structure of The Wife's Lament

NOTES

¹ Michael Lapidge, 'The Comparative Approach', in *Reading Old English Texts*, ed. by Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 20-38 (p. 34).

² Emily Jensen, 'The Wife's Lament's Eorðscræf: Literal or Figural Sign?', *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 91 (1990), 449-57 (pp. 450-51).

³ Recent studies of analogues are P. R. Orton, 'The Wife's Lament and Skírnismál', in *Úr Dölum til Dala: Guðbrandur Vigfússon Centenary Essays*, ed. by Rory McTurk and Andrew Wawn, Leeds Texts and Monographs, n.s. 11 (Leeds: Leeds Studies in English, 1989), pp. 205-37; Paul Battles, 'Of Graves, Caves and Subterranean Dwellings: Eorðscræfe and Eorðsele in The Wife's Lament', *Philological Quarterly*, 73 (1994), 267-86. Orton's conclusions have been developed, with a somewhat cavalier approach to the complexities of the sources, by Robert Luyster, 'The Wife's Lament in the Context of Scandinavian Myth and Ritual', *Philological Quarterly*, 77 (1998), 247-70.

⁴ Folio 115 of the Exeter Book, Exeter Cathedral Library MS 3501. For facsimile see *The Exeter Book of Old English Poetry*, ed. by R. W. Chambers, Max Förster and Robin Flower (London: Lund, 1933); for an edition recording MS pointing, see *The Exeter Book Part II: Poems IX-XXXII*, ed. and trans. by W. S. Mackie, EETS o.s. 194 (London: Oxford University Press, 1934), pp. 152-54.

⁵ David M. Wilson, *Anglo-Saxon Art from the Seventh Century to the Norman Conquest* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1984), pp. 85-86. Wilson prints a photograph of the right-hand panel on p. 85, and photographs of the rest of the casket on pp. 46-47; reproductions of each panel are also included in *The Vikings*, ed. by T. R. Farrell (London: Phillimore, 1982), plates 21-26; a photograph of the right-hand panel is also reproduced in *The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems*, ed. by Elliott van Kirk Dobbie, Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records, 6 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1942), between pp. 116 and 117.

⁶ 'Wulf and Eadwacer, The Wife's Lament, and the Discovery of the Individual in Old English Verse', in *Studies in English Language and Literature: Papers in Honour of E. G. Stanley*, ed. by M. J. Toswell and E. M. Tyler (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 457-74.

⁷ R. I. Page, *An Introduction to English Runes*, 2nd edn (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1999), pp. 177-79; cited by R. W. V. Elliot, *Runes, an Introduction*, 2nd edn (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), pp. 133-34.

⁸ Exeter Book quotations cited from *The Exeter Anthology of Old English Poetry*, ed. by Bernard J. Muir, 2 vols (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 1994), collated with Chambers. I include manuscript pointings, but not the markers which come at the end of poems. Translations from Old English and Latin are my own, and are intended only as a

guide to understanding the original text. However, where I discuss a word's semantics in the course of this piece, I merely include the original word(s) in any translations.

⁹ Page, p. 181.

¹⁰ *Dictionary of Old English*, ed. by A. C. Amos (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1986-), s.v. *denn*.

¹¹ *A Latin Dictionary*, ed. by Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short (London: Oxford University Press, 1879), s.v. *lucus*.

¹² Tacitus, *Germania*, ed. and trans. by H. Hutton, rev. E. H. Warmington, in *Tacitus I: Dialogus, Agricola, Germania*, ed. by E. H. Warmington, rev. edn (London: Heinemann, 1970), pp. 128-215 (pp. 278-79).

¹³ *The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*, ed. and trans. by Christopher Tolkien (London: Nelson, 1960), text p. 47, discussion pp. xxiii-xxviii. Cf. Bede's naming of the first Anglo-Saxon settlers as Hengist and Horsa (both meaning 'horse'), and his claim of a prohibition on the pagan priest Coifi against riding a stallion. Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*, ed. and trans. by Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969, repr. with corrections 1991), books I.15 and II.13.

¹⁴ Battles, pp. 274-76.

¹⁵ *The Early English Carols*, ed. by Richard Leighton Greene, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), no. 450, lines 6-7.

¹⁶ *Altfranzösische Romanzen und Pastouellen*, ed. by Karl Bartsch (Leipzig: Vogel, 1870), p. 111; cf. Helen Estabrook Sandison, *The Chanson d'Aventure in Middle English*, Bryn Mawr College Monographs, 12 (Bryn Mawr: Bryn Mawr College, 1913), p. 48, n. 3.

¹⁷ Joseph Harris, 'Hadubrand's Lament: on the Origin and Age of Elegy in Germanic', in *Heldensage und Heldendichtung im Germanischen*, ed. by Heinrich Beck (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1988), pp. 81-114 (pp. 86-87).

¹⁸ Cf. M. J. Swanton, 'The Wife's Lament and The Husband's Message: A Reconsideration', *Anglia*, 82 (1964), 269-90; W. F. Bolton, 'The Wife's Lament and The Husband's Message: A Reconsideration Revisited', *Archiv für das Studium der neueren Sprachen und Literaturen*, 205 (1969), 337-51; *The Cambridge Songs* ('*Carmina Cantabrigiensia*'), ed. and trans. by Jan M. Ziolkowski, Garland Library of Medieval Literature, Series A, 66 (London: Garland, 1994), nos. 27, 40, 48.

¹⁹ *Three Old English Elegies*, ed. by R. F. Leslie (Aberdeen: Manchester University Press, 1961), p. 53.

²⁰ The precise nature of this context is essentially unknown. Nicholas Jacobs has emphasised the suggestion that the form of intermixed prose and verse preserved in Irish provides a model to understand the Welsh 'saga *englynion*', and extended it to Old English poems such as *WfL*, supposing that the poetry which we have has been recorded without its

The Images and Structure of The Wife's Lament

prose frame ('Celtic Saga and the Contexts of Old English Elegiac Poetry', *Etudes Celtiques*, 26 (1989), 95-142). There is very little evidence of any Welsh influence on Old English literature, but such a form could have come via Irish ecclesiastics, or through Norse (cf. *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II*). However, while we have indisputable evidence for Old English verse-narratives, our only Old English prose narratives (e.g. saints' lives, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*) appear to derive from Latinate forms. The only possible exception which I know of is the 'Cynewulf and Cyneheard' 755 *Chronicle* entry, which, while in some ways impressive, does little to suggest a burgeoning Old English prose narrative style. We should perhaps suppose instead that had, say, the compiler of the Codex Regius organised the Exeter Book, we might have had a prose passage explaining *WfL*'s context.

²¹ Martin Green, 'Time, Memory and Elegy in *The Wife's Lament*', in *The Old English Elegies: New Essays in Criticism and Research*, ed. by Martin Green (London: Associated University Presses, 1983), pp. 123-32 (p. 125).

²² Leslie, p. 11. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. by J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon, 2nd rev. edn by Norman Davis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967).

²³ Cf. Elizabeth Dearing Hanscom, 'The Feeling for Nature in Old English Poetry', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 5 (1903-05), 439-63 (p. 454); *Genesis B*, line 60a, which describes hell as *þa deopan dala*.

²⁴ Jean Ritzke-Rutherford, *Light and Darkness in Anglo-Saxon Thought and Writing*, Sprache und Literatur: Regensburger Arbeiten zur Anglistik und Amerikanistik, 17 (Frankfurt: Lang, 1979), p. 175.

²⁵ Orton, p. 212.

²⁶ Amos, s.v. *beorg*.

²⁷ *Exodus*, ed. by Peter J. Lucas (London: Methuen, 1977), p. 87 (citing other examples); Muir, I (1994), p. 307; II (1994), pp. 593-94. Similar and probably related changes are discussed by Richard M. Hogg, *A Grammar of Old English Volume I: Phonology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), pp. 205-07, and Alaric Hall, 'Old MacDonald had a *Fyrm*, *eo*, *eo*, *y*: Two Marginal Developments of <eo> in Old and Middle English', *Quaestio: Selected Proceedings of the Cambridge Colloquium in Anglo-Saxon Norse and Celtic*, 2 (2001), 62-90 (esp. pp. 69-70) (an electronic reproduction of this article is available at <http://www.alarichall.org.uk>).

²⁸ Most recently, Carole Hough, 'The Wife's Lament Line 15b and Daniel Line 499b: Two Notes on Place-Name Evidence', *English Language Notes*, 35 (1998), 1-4.

²⁹ Joseph Bosworth and T. Northcote Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1898), s.v. *hearh*; Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson, *A Guide to Old English*, 5th edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p. 266. N.B. While *bearu* means a

'grove, wood', it is also attested as 'referring to a sacred grove', Amos, s.v. *bearu*. For a survey see Orton, p. 209.

³⁰ MS *strade*. *Beowulf* quotations from *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, ed. by Fr. Klaeber, 3rd edn (Boston: Heath, 1950), collated with *Beowulf: Reproduced in Facsimile*, ed. by Julius Zupitza, 2nd rev. edn by Norman Davis, EETS o.s. 245 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959).

³¹ Ingrid Sanness Johnsen, *Stuttruner i vikingtidens innskrifter* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget Trykningsentral, 1968), pp. 138-40.

³² Sven B. F. Jansson, *Runes in Sweden*, trans. by Peter Foote (Stockholm: Gidlunds, 1987), p. 37.

³³ Battles, p. 273.

³⁴ See, for a survey and study, Karl P. Wentersdorf, 'The Situation of the Narrator in the Old English *Wife's Lament*', *Speculum*, 56 (1981), 492-516.

³⁵ Kathryn Hume, 'The Concept of the Hall in Old English Poetry', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 3 (1974), 63-74 (p. 64).

³⁶ Leslie, pp. 55-56; Battles, p. 274.

³⁷ *Anglo-Saxon Poetry*, trans. by S. A. J. Bradley (London: Dent, 1982), p. 382.

³⁸ Biblical quotations cited from *Biblia Sacra: Iuxta Vulgatam Versionem*, ed. by Robert Weber, 2 vols (Stuttgart: Württembergische Bibelanstalt, 1969).

³⁹ For example, much of Old English poetry is free translation from the Bible and its apocrypha, e.g. *Genesis*, *Exodus*, *Daniel*, *Andreas*, and much besides this draws on Christian-Latin material (e.g., in the Exeter Book, the three *Christ* poems, *The Pheonix*, *The Seafarer*).

⁴⁰ John McKinnell, 'The Context of *Vǫlundarkvida*', *Saga Book of the Viking Society*, 23 (1990), 1-27; Richard Cox, 'Snake Rings in *Deor* and *Vǫlundarkvida*', *Leeds Studies in English*, 22 (1991), 1-20.

⁴¹ Cf. Orton, 219-21. Quotations from the Codex Regius from *Edda: die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälen I. Text*, ed. by Gustav Neckel, 4th rev. edn by Hans Kuhn (Heidelberg: Winter, 1962). Translations from *The Poetic Edda*, trans. by Carolyne Larrington (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

⁴² Tolkien (1961), p. 14.

⁴³ Ritzke-Rutherford, p. 202.

⁴⁴ The implications of this stanza are particularly interesting for *WfL*; see fn. 58 below.

⁴⁵ *Anglo-Saxon and Norse Poems*, ed. and trans. by N. Kershaw (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922), p. 174.

⁴⁶ For the former argument see Thomas M. Davis, 'Another View of *The Wife's*

The Images and Structure of The Wife's Lament

Lament, *Papers on English Language and Literature*, 1 (1965), 291-305 (p. 302).

⁴⁷ Bradley, p. 384; Kershaw, p. 33.

⁴⁸ *A Choice of Anglo-Saxon Verse*, ed. and trans. by Richard Hamer (London: Faber, 1970), pp. 72-74; Bradley, pp. 384-85; Leslie, pp. 47-48; D. R. Howlett, 'The Wife's Lament and The Husband's Message', *Neophilologische Mitteilungen*, 79 (1978), 7-10 (p. 7).

⁴⁹ Jane L. Curry, 'Approaches to a Translation of the Anglo-Saxon *The Wife's Lament*', *Medium Aevum*, 35 (1966), 187-98.

⁵⁰ Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe, *Visible Song: Transitional Literacy in Old English Verse*, Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England, 4 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 152-53.

⁵¹ M. B. Parkes, 'Punctuation, or Pause and Effect', in *Medieval Eloquence: Studies in the Theory and Practice of Medieval Rhetoric*, ed. by James J. Murphy (London: California University Press, 1978), pp. 127-42 (p. 138).

⁵² O'Keefe, *Visible Song*, p. 153.

⁵³ MS *blæð*.

⁵⁴ Taking *blife gebæro* in line 21a with the description.

⁵⁵ Cf. D. R. Howlett, 'The Structures of *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*', *Studia Neophilologica*, 47 (1975), 313-17.

⁵⁶ Mitchell and Robinson, §145; cf. Bruce Mitchell, *Old English Syntax*, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), II, §3914.

⁵⁷ For an argument based on this lexical contrast, see Andy Orchard, 'Oral Tradition' in *Reading Old English Texts*, ed. by Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 101-23 (p. 121, n. 3). An interesting comparison may be drawn between my reading and stanza six of *Helreið Brynhildar*, whose first part I have already quoted. Its second half carries the same meaning in both MSS (cf. *Flateyjarbók*, ed. by Sigurður Nordal, 4 vols (Akranes: Flateyjarútgáfan, 1944-45), I (1944), p. 395); I quote the *Codex Regius* text here:

Lét hami vára
hugfullr konungr,
átta systra,
undir eic borit;
var ec vetra tólf,
ef þic vita lystir,
er ec ungom gram
eiða seldac.

The wise king had our
magic garments –
eight sisters we were together –
put under an oak;
I was twelve years old,
if you want to know,
when I gave my promise
to the young prince.

Quite to what event Brynhildr alludes here is unknown: 'Should the "young prince" be construed as the king who carried off the *hamir* and should it be understood that he exacted a betrothal in exchange for their return? Or is the "young prince" Agnarr, whom, whom she presently supports in battle?' (Theodore M. Andersson, *The Legend of Brynhild*, *Islandica*, 42 (London: Cornell University Press, 1980), pp. 114-15). But a possible reading would be that, upon reaching the age of majority (12), she swore oaths to a 'young prince', and he subsequently sent her (or, in the *CR* text, her swan-cloak), under an oak-tree. *WfL*'s 'ic up weox' could imply much the same as *Helreið Brynhildar*'s 'var ec vetra tólf, and could also, reading *ða* as 'when' in line 18, mark her growing up as a significant step towards swearing her oaths of love. It seems possible, then, that the narrative behind Brynhildr's allusion is essentially similar to that of *WfL*. As I have already noted, in Norse, it is supernatural women who tend to be set in locations such as we see in *WfL*, and if something similar held for the ancestors of the *topos* which we may perceive in *WfL*, then the association of the story of what appears to be a normal woman with that of a valkyrie need not occasion surprise.

⁵⁸ Cf. *The Wanderer* lines 1-5.

⁵⁹ Cf. note 55; Davis, p. 299.

⁶⁰ Cf. Leslie, p. 53.

⁶¹ Mitchell, 1; §1399.

⁶² Jensen, p. 454.

⁶³ Kershaw, p. 175.

⁶⁴ Kathryn A. Lowe, ' "A Fine and Private Place": *The Wife's Lament*, ll. 33-34, the Translators and the Critics', *Lastworda betst': Essays in Memory of Christine E. Fell*, ed. by Kathryn A. Lowe and Carole Hough (Donington: Shaun Tyas, 2002), pp. 122-43. My thanks go to Katie Lowe for showing me this article in advance of publication.

⁶⁵ *ibid.*, p. 137.

⁶⁶ Harris, p. 96.

⁶⁷ Cf. Mitchell and Robinson, p. 164.

⁶⁸ Hamer, p. 73.

⁶⁹ Cf. *An Anthology of Old English Poetry*, trans. by Charles W. Kennedy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 11.

⁷⁰ *The Old English Elegies*, ed. by Anne L. Klinck (London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992), p. 187.

⁷¹ Donald K. Fry, 'The Cliff of Death in Old English Poetry', in *Comparative Research on Oral Traditions: A Memorial for Milman Parry*, ed. by John Miles Foley (Columbus: Slavonica, 1987), pp. 211-33 (p. 215); cf. A. C. Bouman, *Patterns in Old English and Old Icelandic literature*, *Leidse Germanistische en Anglistische Reeks*, 1 (Leiden: Universitaire

The Images and Structure of The Wife's Lament

Pers, 1961), p. 59.

⁷² For *Judith* see Fry, pp. 215-16; for Blickling Homily XVI cf. Andy Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the Beowulf-Manuscript* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1995), p. 39.

⁷³ e.g. Eleanor Lench, 'The Wife's Lament: a Poem of the Living Dead', *Comitatus*, 1 (1970), 3-23 (pp. 16-17, n. 37).

⁷⁴ Ursula Schaefer, 'Two Women in Need of a Friend: a comparison of *The Wife's Lament* and Eangyth's Letter to Boniface', in *Germanic Dialects: Linguistic and Philological Investigations*, ed. by Bela Brogyani and Thomas Krömmelbein, Amsterdam Studies in the Theory and History of Linguistic Science, Series 4: Current Issues in Linguistic Theory, 38 (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1986), pp. 491-524 (p. 505).

⁷⁵ Alain Renoir, 'Christian Inversion in *The Wife's Lament*', *Studia Neophilologica*, 49 (1977), 19-24 (pp. 22-23).

⁷⁶ Fittingly enough, perhaps, for a poem immediately preceding, in its manuscript context, one on Doomsday, the start of a sequence dealing with 'aspects of the Easter liturgical season' (Muir, 1, p. 26). It may also be noted in this connection that *WjL* can be seen to exhibit many features found in riddles, conceivably making its position in the Exeter Book between riddles 1-59 and *Judgement Day I* a deliberate pivot between sections of the anthology (cf. Faye Walker-Pelkey, 'Frige Hwæt ic Hätte: *The Wife's Lament* as Riddle', *Papers on Language and Literature*, 28 (1992), 242-66). A further point of interest, made to me by Andy Orchard, is that not only does the first line of *WjL* contain *giedd*, among whose meanings is 'riddle', but so does the last of *Wulf and Eadwacer*, the poem that precedes riddles 1-59: 'uncer giedd geador'.

⁷⁷ D. A. Bray, 'A Woman's Loss and Lamentation: Heledd's Songs and *The Wife's Lament*', *Neophilologus*, 79 (1995), 147-54 (p. 152).

⁷⁸ I am much indebted to Paul Bibire and Andy Orchard for their helpfulness and advice in the writing of this article, and thank them. I thank also Zoe Boulter, Mary and Naomi Ward, and Harriet Thomsett for reading drafts and helping with library facilities.