

## The Structural Effect of Sympathetic Resonance in *The Wife's Lament*

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Although it seems natural to assume that the persona in *The Wife's Lament* is a woman, it is extremely difficult to discern precisely what the author attempts to represent in this poem. Explicitly emphasized is the “friendship or love” between the two personae, as well as the sorrow of their separation. In this paper, some traditional feminist criticism will be challenged by the hypothesis that it is not the feminine emotion of the persona, but the structure of the poem that the author attempts to elaborate on. This is based on the idea that the structure of the poem is congruent with a musical code: sympathetic resonance.

Feminist critics have long involved themselves in decoding femininity in Anglo-Saxon poetry. Bennett attempted to highlight the differences between male and female exiles in four Old English elegies: *The Wanderer*, *The Seafarer*, *The Wife's Lament*, and *Wulf and Eadwacer*. She concluded that the speaker of *The Wife's Lament* is female, whose exile is regarded as a challenge to the social structure.<sup>1</sup> Klinck saw the possibility that the poem is a “woman's song,” suggesting that this was composed by a female author.<sup>2</sup> Belanoff concluded in her article that femininity in the poem can be recognized by the fact that the narrator of the poem speaks from within her anguish.<sup>3</sup> Frese interestingly found a connection between the speaker of *The Wife's Lament* and Æstrild in Lazamon's *Brut*, giving a clear female image to the anonymous persona in *The Wife's Lament*.<sup>4</sup> Most scholars agree that the persona in *The Wife's Lament* is supposed to be female. Yet the

question remains: is it so vital to clarify the femininity of the speaker, especially when a separation between the two personae is most emphasised? This is indeed the question we shall discuss according to the hypothesis that the ambiguity of gender is intended by the author—who most likely focuses on producing a response-structure in the poem. Accordingly, it can therefore be assumed that the persona does not possess the particular image of a woman but is merely a dramatic speaker who plays a part in weaving lyrics throughout the verse.

As mentioned above, recent scholars have attempted to shed light on the feminine attitudes of the speaker or grammatical and semantic cruxes in the poem. However, it seems worthwhile to examine the verse from a new angle. Interestingly, *The Wife's Lament* is framed with a unique structure akin to a musical performance: a duet between the two different instruments, taking turns throughout the verse and demonstrating sympathetic resonance. Their respective parts represent the particular notes in common, such as “departure,” “isolation,” “feud” and “exile.” The verse springs from the prologue which distinctly presents the purpose of the composition: *wræcsiþ*, “miserable fate” (l. 5). The departure of the speaker’s beloved is then followed by that of the speaker him/herself. By turns, both suffer the same fate, eventually bringing them to separation at the epilogue.

As a marker in discussing the echoing effect of the verse, the most obvious is the changes of personal pronoun. A transition of persona and his/her action or emotion may reveal how elaborately this poem is composed according to a particular musical device.

Firstly, in the prologue, the speaker explicitly vocalises his/her lamentation—the purpose of the recital—wherein he/she self-addresses as *Ic* “I” (l. 1) which of course is gender neutral. The prologue convinces readers that the speaker’s sorrow originates from *wræcsiþ* “miserable fate” (l. 5).<sup>5</sup> The change of persona appears at line 6, wherein *min hlaford* “my lord” is

the marker. Since this is commonly used to address a male dominator, the persona in this part of the poem seems to be the speaker's superior. As far as *min hlaford* refers to a common addressing label in a royal court, such as *min mæg and min hlaford* "my kinsman and my lord," the gender of the speaker remains unknown. In lines 6–7 *Ærest min hlaford gewat heonan of leodum / ofer ypa gelac*, "my lord" departed from here from people over the rolling of waves, which indicates that he left his people, including the speaker, and went on a voyage to somewhere beyond the sea. Then again comes the change of persona back to the speaker as follows:

Hæfde ic uhtceare  
hwær min leodfruma    londes wære.  
Ða ic me feran gewat    folgað secan,  
wineleas wræcca    for minre weapearfe.  
Ongunnon þæt þæs monnes    magas hycgan  
þurh dyrne gepoht,    þæt hy todælden unc,  
þæt wit gewidost    in woruldrice  
lifdon laðlicost,    ond mec longade.

(ll. 7b–14)<sup>6</sup>

(I had grief where my lord was on land. When I departed to journey to seek service, a friendless wanderer for my grievous need, the kinsmen of the man began to think through secret thought, they would part us, we, as far apart as possible in the whole world, lived in most wretched fashion, and anxiety occupied me.)

The speaker addresses him/herself as *wineleas wræcca* "friendless wanderer" and *ic me feran gewat* "I departed to journey" for *folgað secan* "to seek service." Although it is difficult again to discover grammatically if the speaker is a woman, the readers' attention should be drawn to the incident where the speaker dares to follow the lord and ventures over the sea on

account of his/her loyalty. The ambiguity of the speaker's gender, which is likely intentional, must surely have evoked the readers' compassion, whereby he, mostly a male retainer, identifies himself with the speaker of the poem. It may be a linguistic effect on the readers to use a neutral persona as a speaker and also an allusion to courtly convention. Significantly, the voyage of the lord is immediately followed by that of his admirer, and this is exactly when the persona changes. In the passage above, the use of the same note "departure" as in the preceding lines in which the lord departed, heightens the dramatic effect by sympathetic resonance as with a refrain in music.

Secondly, the change of persona occurs next at line 15, *hlaforð min* "my lord," who commanded the speaker to live in a country where he/she had few friends (ll. 15–16). This is succeeded by the change of the subject, *forþon is min hyge geomor* "therefore my mind is sad" (l. 17b). Focused herein is the new phase "isolation"—living on the unfamiliar land with the lack of friends as a staccato to the next stage. In this part, the speaker again accentuates that isolation is the cause of his/her sorrow.

The persona changes to the speaker next at line 18, with the confession that the beloved committed *morþor* "crime, murder" (l. 20b). Then *wit* "we" (l. 21b) made a vow never to be parted until *deað* "death" (l. 22b). However, *thæt* "that" (l. 23b) is changed. Now *hit* "it" (l. 24b) is taken as if there were not our *freondscipe* "friendship, love" (l. 25a). Eventually, *ic* "I" (l. 25b) shall suffer the *fæhðu* "feud" (l. 26b) of my dearly one. As in the following passage, the change of subject in every line reflects a rapid transition of the fate of the speaker and his/her lord. When he committed the crime, both had to break their vow since the lord's exile resulted in separation. Their love (or friendship) was also ruined.<sup>7</sup> During the course of events, the speaker had to be involved in the feud which the lord happened to break out:

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ða ic me ful gemæcne monnan funde  
heardsæligne, hygegeomorne,  
mod miþendne, morþon hycgende,  
bliþe gebæro. Ful oft wit beotedan  
þæt unc ne gedælde nemne deað ana,  
owiht elles. Eft is þæt onhworfen.  
Is nu swa hit no wære  
freondscipe uncer. Sceal ic feor ge neah  
mines felaleofan fæhðu dreogan.

(ll. 18–26)

(Since I found the man, extremely suited to me, hard in his fortune, sad-hearted, concealing his heart, contemplating a violent death, in joyful demeanour. Very often, we two vowed that anything else but a death does not part us two. That is turned around afterwards. Now it is as if there were not our friendship. And I must suffer the feud of my beloved far and near.)

This passage clearly shows the Anglo-Saxon convention that the husband and the wife (or the lord and his retainer) should have the same destiny. Both can neither be parted nor behave differently. Additionally, they must have the same way of thinking, the same experience, the same love and the same destination. If they cannot follow the Anglo-Saxon convention in their lives, they must be cursed, as the conclusion of the poem makes clear.<sup>8</sup> When the husband (or the lord) becomes a criminal, his wife (or retainer) must also suffer the same punishment.

The noun in line 27 suddenly turned neutral, singular, *mon* “one” who ordered the speaker to live alone in a remote place, deep in the forest. This line is regarded as a turning point, as with lines 21–24, showing a transition of the exile theme, where the speaker must suffer the same punishment as his/her lord. Then the change of subject to *ic* “I” (l. 29b) is followed by the depiction of the remote place where he/she has been exiled. What must be

remarked here is the site itself: it is the place where *Sindon dena dimme, duna uphea, / bitre burgtunas brerum beweaxne, / wic wynna leas* “valleys are gloomy, hills lofty, sharp protecting hedges grown over with briars, dwelling place devoid of joys” (ll. 30–32a). The lines preceding this represent the speaker’s equal guilt in his/her lord’s crime. While the speaker is banished deeply in the woods, valleys and hills, the lord has been expelled from his own country, far away beyond the sea and lives on a cliff (ll. 47b–48). The speaker’s wilderness-exile is the counterpoint to the lord’s sea-exile. Another echo resides in a similar expression referring to their living places: the speaker has made his/her abode in *wic wynna leas* “dwelling place devoid of joys” (l. 32a), while the lord is in a *dreorsele* “desolate hall” (l. 50a).<sup>9</sup> It is clearly suggested by the poet that the speaker’s isolation should closely parallel that of the lord’s.

In line 33, there is a clear marker, *frynd* “friends,” which turns the reader’s attention in a different direction. When the speaker imagines that one’s friends are on the land, some lovers live and occupy the bed (ll. 33b–34), he/she laments his/her own hard fate with the words *wræcsipas* “miseries” (l. 38b), *earfoða fela* “many hardships” (l. 39a) and *modceare* “grief of heart” (l. 40a).

The epilogue begins with the distinctive subject *geong mon* “young one” (l. 42a), which is likely meant to address the reader, attract his attention and lead him to the providence where the poet persuades him to follow:

A scyle geong mon wesan geomormod,  
 Heard heortan gepoht; swylce habban sceal  
 Blife gebæro, eac þon breostceare,  
 Sinsorgna gedreag. (ll. 42–45a)

(A young man must be sad-minded, thought of fierce heart, must likewise have cheerful demeanour, moreover the grief of heart, multitude of constant sorrows.)

The poet insists that people should face any kind of misfortune and confront their own fate with prudence. The last change of subject *min freond* “my friend, my lord” comes immediately following this passage (l. 47b); the lord again appears to be an exile sitting on the cliff, beyond the sea, suffering *modceare* “grief of heart” (l. 51a), recalling *wynlicran wic* “delightful dwelling place” (l. 52a). The emotional transition of the lord seems to be symmetrical to that of the speaker, intervened by the “young man” passage in the middle of the two personae.

As discussed above, the poet seems to deliberately locate the echoing note alternately between the speaker and the lord. To transfer one note to another, the change of persona plays the part of a marker. Split into respective sections by the markers, the entire verse is framed with the sympathetic resonance whose elements, “departure,” “isolation,” “feud” and “exile” are equally experienced by the speaker and the lord.

So far as the gender of the persona is concerned, *The Wife's Lament* can be regarded as the most ambiguous of all the elegies in Anglo-Saxon literature. Klinck observed in her recent article as follows:

However, a specifically sexual relationship is implied by *mines felaleofan fæhðu*, “the enmity (‘feud’) of my very dear one” (line 26), and *freond*, “friend, lover” (line 47), as well as by the contrast between the speaker’s pacing her cave in solitude and the “friends” (lovers) who keep their bed together (lines 33b–36), and, possibly, by the idea of waiting for a dear one (line 53).<sup>10</sup>

As stated is an equality in hardship between the personae in the poem, the reader can be persuaded that women are equally treated. Tacitus also testified in *Germania* that “She (a woman) takes one husband, just as she has one body and one life. Her thoughts must not stray beyond him or her desires survive him. And she must not love even the husband for himself, but as an

embodiment of the married state.”<sup>11</sup> Although it is plausible that *freond* refers to “lover,” as stated above, the language in which the speaker addresses the beloved is frequently used by a male retainer.<sup>12</sup> Klinck—like Niles, who pointed out that the grammar of the poem allows several different interpretations.<sup>13</sup>—also agrees on this point. If the poet intentionally makes the gender of the speaker vague in order to draw the reader’s compassion, the result is undoubtedly successful.

On the contrary, the unity between the speaker and the lord is made explicit in the structural effect of sympathetic resonance. The conformity in echoing elements, the same fate they must share, is the decisive factor which support the idea that it is not the gender but the unity of the personae which is most remarkable in the poem. In simple terms, the effect of sympathetic resonance discussed in this article is a structural device utilised to emphasise unity; the lord and his admirer are always to depart, be isolated, be involved in a feud and exiled in the same way.

### Notes

1. See Helen T. Bennett, “Exile and the Semiosis of Gender in Old English Elegies,” *Class and Gender in Early English Literature*, ed. Britton J. Harwood and Gillian R. Overing (Indianapolis: Indiana U. P., 1994), 43–58.

2. See Anne L. Klinck, *The Old English Elegies: A Critical Edition and Genre Study* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s U. P., 2001), 244.

3. See Pat Belanoff, “Ides . . . geomrode giddum: The Old English Female Lament,” *Medieval Woman’s Song: Cross-Cultural Approaches*, eds. Anne L. Klinck and Ann Marie Rasmussen (Philadelphia: PENN, 2002), 29–46, 39.

4. See Dolores Warwick Frese, “Sexing Political Tropes of Conquest: ‘The Wife’s Lament’ and *Lazamon’s Brut*,” *Sex and Sexuality in Anglo-Saxon England: Essays in Memory of Daniel Gillmore Calder*, eds. Carol Pasternack and Lisa M. C. Weston (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2004), 203–233.

5. *Wræcsip* consists of two words *wræc* and *sip*; *wræc* has several meanings, such as “misery, suffering that comes as punishment, where the punishment or misery is exile or banishment,” while *sip* “journey, arrival, course of action, a path, a time.” The translation is



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derived from *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, eds. Bosworth and Toller (Oxford: O.U.P., 1991). The entire meaning of *wræcsip* can be regarded as “miserable journey, suffering time or an exile.” This key word in the prologue attracts the reader’s attention with his expectation to discover a cause of the misery.

6. The edition used throughout is Klinck, *The Old English Elegies*.

7. *Freondscipe* can also refer to the love between a husband and a wife.

8. *Wa bið þam þe sceal of langope leofes abidan*. At the end of the verse, as the epilogue reflects the prologue, the poet resolves the destiny of the speaker: “Woe is the one who must wait for the beloved because of longing.”

9. *Dreorsele* is the combination of two words *dreor* “dreary” and *sele* “dwelling, hall.” *Sele* is apparently a counterpart of *wic*.

10. See Anne L. Klinck, “Poetic Markers of Gender in Medieval ‘Woman’s Song’: Was Anonymous A Woman?,” *Neophilologus* 87 (2003), 339–359, 349.

11. See Tacitus, *The Agricola and The Germania*, trans. and rev. S. A. Handford, Penguin Books (1983), 117–118.

12. It seems most plausible that these lines describe a love between lovers in general. A possibility of male and female personae, however, can be still vague, when *leofe lifgende leger weardiað* (l. 34) simply implies “live and sleep in peace.”

13. Although Niles assigned the speaker a wife’s role, he admitted the varying responses to the poem to emerge on the part of different readers or listeners. See John D. Niles, “The Problem of the Ending of *The Wife's Lament*,” *Speculum* 78 (2003), 1107–1150, 1147.