

英国古哀歌における女性の個の尊重：
The Husband's Message の一考察

白井 菜穂子*

Woman's Individuality in the Old English Elegies:
The Example of *The Husband's Message*

Naoko Shirai

要 旨 女性の個としての存在価値を英文学の中に見れば、それは古英詩の時代に遡ると言える。戦争・宗教をテーマとした作品が多いため、必然的にその主人公は男性となるが、まれに *Judith*, *The Wife's Lament* などの作品に女性が主役として登場する。本論では、哀歌のジャンルの中で *The Husband's Message* に見られる女性の Individuality を考える。女性の観点から語られる *The Wife's Lament* ではなく、男性の立場から描かれた女性が登場する *The Husband's Message* を題材として取り上げた理由は、男性の観点でアングロ・サクソン文学における女性の Identity を検討するところに独自性を持たせるためである。*The Husband's Message* における女性像は男性と対等の立場にあり、一個の人間として尊敬されるが、一度相手に忠誠を誓った場合はその証明を命がけて求められるものである。男性から女性に向けてのメッセージという形式の詩において、女性の個の尊重をメッセージの受信者・発信者・語り手の関係、男女平等、女性の尊重、女性に求められる忠誠心の観点から検討する。

Introduction

Recent studies of *The Husband's Message*, one of the works which make up the Exeter Book, have all been predisposed with decoding the riddles of the runes at the end of the poem.¹⁾ The runes of *The Husband's Message* might leave a certain intellectual challenge for the readers to try and decipher the rune codes; however, the overall message of the poem closely resembles the messages expressed in *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*, which are compositions also found in the Exeter Book. These poems convey such themes as man's solitude, life at sea, and the intricacies of human bonds. The primary focus of the poem lies within the bond of the first person, the addresser, and the second person, the addressee. Female "individuality" and "obligation" are the main themes of this poem and are expressed directly from a male point of view, which is common in Anglo-Saxon poetry due to the male dominance of the society.

Behind the apparent picture of male dominance, equality between the sexes does occasionally occur in aristocratic/royal environments, in instances of deeds of good will, and sometimes within the minds of characters who appear in Old English poetry. The concept of "valiancy" is expected to be

* 本学助教 教授 アングロ・サクソン文学

shown towards women, as in the example of Brunhilde's revenge in the Poetic Saga, in which the protagonist avenges her husband's death by slaughtering the men who killed her husband.

British gentlemen have long been well-known for their gallantry towards ladies; however, the convention seems to have its earliest roots in the Mediaeval romances. Since the ancient times of Britain, men and women have been equally respected and both sexes, strictly bound, must take oaths of loyalty to one another.

Hereafter, the speaker and the two characters in *The Husband's Message* will first be defined in order to disentangle and examine the complicated relationship among the three. Secondly, the equality between the sexes will be the next focus, with an example given of man's cooperative attitude. The next discussion will be how the wife is respected in *The Husband's Message*. Finally, the wife's loyalty to the husband is one of the most distinguishing features in this poem, when she is demanded to fulfill her oath to live together eternally at the expense of her life.

The Addresser and the Addressee in the Poem

One of the core enigmatic difficulties in this poem has been to distinguish who is the speaker of the poem. This confusion is caused by the damaged parts of the text in the very beginning of the poem at which point, although slightly unclear, the speaker probably introduces himself. It has been plausible that the speaker is regarded as a rune-staff, for he names himself at the beginning of the poem as *treocyn*. *Ic tudre aweox* (l. 2): "species of tree. I grew up as an offspring." Some scholars argued that this poem was composed in prosopopeia. Some recent studies concur on a similar hypothesis that *The Husband's Message* was either a riddle or a part of a longer riddle poem, since several lines that precede *The Husband's Message* usually belong to *Riddle 60* and some scholars assert that those lines are, indeed, the actual introduction of *The Husband's Message*. Orton introduces, in detail, several theories on the identity of the speaker in his article and remarks, "(And so) the speech may be, not so much an expansion of the runic message, but more an expression of what it was meant to imply to the recipient."²⁾ It is indeed manifest that the majority of the poem consists of the husband addressing his wife and expressing his love toward her and the voyage she should make to fulfill her oath.³⁾

Here in this article, the question does not reside in revealing the identity of the speaker, but in studying significant factors of the message from the addresser, the husband, to the addressee, the wife. Through the speaker, i.e. the rune-staff, the addresser talks to the addressee a couple of times. For the first time, it appears in line 7 surrounded by a few illegible parts:

Ful oft ic on bates ...
þær mec mondryhten min ...
ofer heah *hafu*. (6-8b)⁴⁾

The speaker calls the addresser *mondryhten min* meaning "my man-lord," also interpreted as, "my lord of people." An object is sometimes personified in a riddle poem, which heightens lyric value and

direct-speech effect of the poem.⁵⁾ The lines above suggest that the addresser should be the possessor of the object which is perhaps a rune-staff. The addresser appears next in line 13:

Hwæt, þec þonne biddan het se þisne beam agrof (13)⁶⁾

This line is slightly complicated that the speaker describes himself *þisne beam* “on this tree” as if the third person comments on himself. This is an elaborate example of rhetoric used to successively shift the speaker and imply a close relationship between the inscriber, the addresser, and “the tree” or “the speaker.”

Thirdly, the speaker clarifies the identity of the addresser as the person who is expecting the addressee to visit him. The verses are as follows:

þær se þeoden is þin on wenum. (29)⁷⁾

The Old English word *þeoden* undoubtedly refers a noble liege or a king; hereafter his description as a gold-possessor and a gold-giver is fully remarked.

On the other hand, in what way does the speaker depict the addressee? Interestingly enough, the addressee is mostly addressed as *þu/þe, þec, þin*, meaning “you” in the lines 1, 10, 12, 14, 20, 21, 22, 24, 27/13, 24/29, 48, the usage of which introduces the idea that those lines above could be a direct speech given to the addressee by the addresser. The only epithet explicitly addressed to her is *sinc-hroden*, meaning “treasure-adorned.” Leslie makes remarks on this by saying, “The use of this epithet suggests not only that the person addressed is a woman, but that she is a lady of rank; e.g. the use of the similar epithet *goldhroden* in *Beowulf* 614, 640, 1948, 2025, where the reference is always to a queen or princess.”⁸⁾ Therefore the addressee is regarded as almost the same in rank as the addresser. Moreover, it is possible to define the addressee as a woman, and that she is to be treated equally.

Equality between the Sexes

One of the main features in this poem is that a woman is held with respect as a man’s partner. Noble women usually appear in heroic poems as hostesses of feast, who are to praise man’s heroism and entertain him with their hospitality.⁹⁾ A woman is sometimes depicted as a female warrior, such as in *Judith* (a Hebrew heroine), who enchants and beheads an enemy king, and defeats the heathen (Assyrians) with her Christian faith. In this case, the woman is construed as the counterpart of *Beowulf*, fairly admired for her heroism compared with men’s deeds, regardless of the author’s emphasis on her femininity, beauty, wisdom and chastity.

In *The Husband’s Message*, it is her partnership that the wife is required to have in conferring treasure to the retainers of her hall. “A treasure giver” is an ordinary epithet to a king, i.e. a man, in Anglo-Saxon poetry. However, the author of the poem draws the readers’ attention to the sexual

equality between the spouses; the wife is to be enthroned together with her husband and impartially honoured to be a treasure giver. The following speech is recited by the speaker of the poem in place of the husband in a certain remote country. He wishes to reunite with his wife and for her to support him in order for him to establish his own royal court through divine providence:

Ne mæg him [ofer] worulde willa* * *
 mara on gemyndum, þæs þe he me sægde,
 þonne inc geunne alwaldend god
 ætsomme siþþan motan
 secgum ond gesiþum s[inc gedælan],
 næglede beagas. (30–35a)¹⁰⁾

The word *ætsomme*, meaning “together,” shows the unity between the wife and the husband. The compound of *æt* meaning “at” and *somme* (*sammian*), meaning “assemble, unite, gather together,” explicitly suggests that the lord and the lady should distribute treasure “together” between a man and his companion (*secgum ond gesiþum sinc brytnian*).

Again emphasized is the concept of a treasure-giver: *næglede beagas*, literally meaning “studded rings/bracelets/crowns,” and hereafter the husband’s possession of gold is mentioned although the verses are illegible here and there. Should Almighty God grant them both good fortune, then they could rejoice in bestowing a gift upon their company. The lines just before the remark on Almighty God allude to the request for the wife’s voyage, which probably implies the risk of voyage and their successful reunion by the grace of God.

With respect to conferring treasure, the equality between the husband and his wife is clearly signified in this poem. People in Anglo-Saxon times may have set a value on female status as a treasure-giver, when a woman is at least born of noble birth. Since the wife is strongly demanded to bring her word into action in *The Husband’s Message*, it is highly significant to examine the rewards for what she has done at the expense of her life. They are absolutely respectable. Reunion, queenship, love and equal fame with her husband, offered to them by his retainers.

The Wife: the Utmost Treasure for Husband

The wife is highly respected in *The Husband’s Message* as compared with horses, treasures and mead halls which should be naturally regarded as the most valuable things that Anglo-Saxon warriors pursue. In this poem, the speaker addresses the wife as *þu sinchroden* “you, the treasure-adorned” (l. 14a). A woman who is *hroden* “covered” with *sinc* “treasure” proves to be of nobility. She is also named *þeodnes dohtor*, meaning “lord’s daughter” (l. 48a), which shows her aristocratic origin as well. The following lines clarify the husband’s proposal that his wife is more invaluable for him than any other factor of the liege’s honour.

nis him wilna gad,

ne meara, ne maðma, ne meododreama,
 ænges ofer eorþan eorl gestreona,
 þeodnes dohtor, gif he þin beneah. (45b-48)¹¹⁾

Herein enumerated are the well-known rewards to liege lords in Anglo-Saxon times: *meara* “horses,” *maðma* “treasures,” *meododreama* “mead(hall)-joy,” *ænges ofer eorþan eorl gestreona* “any noble treasures over the earth.” The husband proclaims that he never needs any of these honourable belongings if he can possess his wife aside. They are the rewards that most warriors seek for in battle fields as depicted in *Beowulf* and other heroic poems. With regard to the focus on respect and affection for one’s wife, this poem is quite exceptional. To value matrimony above all else is not usually themed in Old English poetry.¹²⁾ It seems quite Anglo-Saxon that the love for a woman should be compared with the values of martial equipments such as these. On the contrary, it could be evinced in this poem that the sincerity to the wife should be incomparable and utmost pleasure for the husband to what he can obtain with distinguished services in battlefields. To esteem matrimonial love higher than martialism reveals a humane aspect of society that is very down to earth.

Loyalty to the Husband

From a male point of view, what is it that is required of a female in return for his affection in Anglo-Saxon times? To modern readers, it seems rather impudent to importune women some rewards for what men have done for them. Anglo-Saxon men, however, take it for granted that husbands should claim the evidence of their wives’ sincerity: “to execute their oath.” It seems not enough to be truthful to their husbands, but to prove their loyalty and to put what they have promised to their husbands into action would be necessary and demanded of women in Anglo-Saxon times. In the following lines of *The Husband’s Message*, the husband suggests that his wife should remember the words they have pledged never to be separated from one another.

Ic gehatan dear
 þæt þu þær tirlfæste treowe findest.
 Hwæt, þec þonne biddan het se þisne beam agrof
 þæt þu, sinchroden, sylf gemunde
 on gewitlocan wordbeotunga
 þe git on ærdagum oft gespræcon,
 þenden git moston on meoduburgum
 eard weardigan, an lond bugan,
 freondscype fremman. (11b-19a)¹³⁾

Mentioned here are the firm bonds between husbands and wives who are regarded to be equal and of the same responsibility in reaching an agreement. The expressions such as *git on ærdagum oft gespræcon*, meaning “you two often agreed upon,” *git moston ... eard weardigan* “you two might have

occupied the abode,” *an lond bugan* “inhabited in one land,” and *freondscype fremman* “displayed relationship” shed light on the “cooperation” in which Anglo-Saxon spouses would have found much significance. In these lines, the speaker of the poem suggests that a husband and his wife should converse well on all decision-making, including the important issue of living together in one place, and above all to show affection toward one another. Here described is an ideal of spouses in Anglo-Saxon times. The speaker tells us that husbands and wives assume equal responsibility for establishing the bonds of matrimony.

Succeeding the above mentioned lines which try to recall the pledge they made in the past to the wife, the speaker recites the significance of carrying out their promise to reunite in a new world. The husband demanded that his wife should set off for the place he is now living in. Moreover, it is confirmed in those lines that, with her strongly determined, she should obey the order to make the voyage, as he expected someone would try to keep her from her journey. This journey is indispensable for her to show her loyalty. In the following lines, it seems clear that a woman is equally required to manifest the loyalty to her husband with *her* valiant deeds:

Hine fæhþo adraf
of sigeþeode. Heht nu sylfa þe
lustum *læran* þæt þu lagu drefde,
siþþan þu gehyrde on hliþes oran
galan geomorne geac on bearwe.
Ne læt þu þec siþþan siþes getwæfan,
lade gelettan, lifgendne monn.
Ongin mere secan, mæwes eþel,
onsite sænacan, þæt þu suð heonan
ofer merelade monnan findest
þær se þeoden is þin on wenum. (19b–29)¹⁴

Unveiled is the reason why the husband was driven away from his homeland in the first two lines. A feud frequently becomes a reason to expel a defeated warrior from his country, which is also regarded as a significant component part of *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*. When the husband is exiled and forced to live in solitude, his wife remains in her country apart from her husband in utter misery. The Old English phrase *on hliþes oran*, meaning “on the edge of the cliff”, encourages the reader to imagine a solitary woman standing on the edge of the cliff overlooking the ocean which reaches into an unknown land where her husband may have drifted to. From the lines *siþþan þu gehyrde ... galan geomorne geac on bearwe*, meaning “as soon as you have heard the mournful cuckoo singing, in the woods,” it is clear that the wife is expected to depart from the country when a cuckoo starts singing, signifying the time when the ice-bound sea thaws in spring.¹⁵ The seeking for her husband has been arranged from the very beginning, as seen in the husband’s remark, *heht hu sylfa þe/lustum læran þæt þu lagu drefde*, meaning “How joyfully he commanded himself to guide you to stir the sea.” When he settles down in the new land, he starts inciting her to perform loyal deeds and to make a

vow. After the lyrical and seasonal verses, he urges his wife set sail out to sea in order to find him. After taking much consideration of harsh journey, the woman decides to perform a heroic deed and risk her life.¹⁶⁾

A loyal allegiance to their husbands was absolutely essential for women. They were required to follow the rule, and go even as far as being forced to travel on the sea on their own. In the old times, traveling by sea must have been far more hazardous than it is today, without having any decent equipment or modern navigation. The wife in the *The Husband's Message* is no doubt asked by her husband to travel over the dangerous sea. It is her obligation to keep her oath to be with her husband for ever, as he requested.

Conclusion

Far from the chivalrous, or rather conventional, overabundant manners towards women in the modern age, Anglo-Saxon men treated women equally, as individuals. Men took high value in respecting and praising their wives. In this poem, the addressee is entitled to the same throne as the addresser's. The wife is designated as a treasure-giver in the hall. She is princely admired and described as a treasure-ornamented. The husband's attitude toward his wife is not that of overexposed chivalry but of matrimonial love, respecting her as an individual.¹⁷⁾

In return for the respect of women's individuality they rejoiced in, they had to pay for it with their loyalty to men. Equal obligation, equal responsibility, and sometimes even embarking on adventures were all required. Hence it is most significant that Anglo-Saxon women had to strictly follow their oaths, had to place absolute credit in the bond of spouses, and even had to risk their lives in response to their husbands' requests.

Notes

- 1) The latest article "The trick of the runes in *The Husband's Message*" was contributed by John D. Niles in *Anglo-Saxon England* 32 (2003), pp. 189–223. The idea to identify the elegies in the Exeter Book as riddle-like is most supported these days as in *The Old English Elegies: a Critical Edition and Genre Study*, edited by Anne L. Klinck, Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001.
- 2) Peter Orton, "The Speaker in *The Husband's Message*," *Leeds Studies in English* 12 (1981), 43–56, p. 47. Orton suggests that the close relationship between OE riddles and *The Husband's Message* creates an enigmatic tone through the poem with the personified speaker vaguely depicted by intention as a rune-staff.
- 3) Bragg pointed out the importance of the message itself as "Despite its inanimate speaker, which indicates proximity to oral culture, this is truly a very literary poem, for it focuses not on the characters of the two lovers, nor on their story, but on the message itself, on the written medium by which it was possible for two literate people to communicate over long distances 'swa hit beorna ma uncre wordcwidas widdor ne mænden.'" Lois Bragg, *The Lyric Speakers of Old English Poetry* (Cranbury: Associated University Presses, Inc., 1991), p. 56.
- 4) All citations of *The Husband's Message* are derived from Anne L. Klinck's *The Old English Elegies: New Essays in Criticism and Research*, Martin Green, ed. (Cranbury: Associated University Press, Inc., 1983). The lines are translated into "Most often, I sought out, in the bosom of the boat, ... where my lord ... me over the high seas."
- 5) Regarding prosopopoeia in Old English Riddles, see Orton 51.
- 6) The lines are interpreted as "Lo! He who inscribed this on this tree commanded to beseech you."

- 7) The translation of the lines is “You find a man, where the king is in expectation of you.”
- 8) Leslie 60.
- 9) In *Beowulf*, Wealhþeo, the queen of the Danes, presents the speech of praising Beowulf’s heroism, his honourable personality in the feast held in Heorot (the famous hall of the Danish king Hroðgar). Her speech mainly consists of the two themes: conferring *Brosinga mene*, the necklace of Freyja in the Elder Edda, on Beowulf, and entreating him for his support to her sons after the king dies. See FR. Klaeber, ed. *Beowulf*, 3rd ed. (Massachusetts: D. C. Heath and Company, 1950), ll. 1168b–1231.
- 10) The translation is as follows: No desire wishes to happen to him in the world, more on his mind, as he told me, would Almighty God grant you both, than that you two together may distribute treasure, studded crowns, to man and companion afterwards.
- 11) Translated are the verses as “A lack of desires comes to him, not of horses, not of treasure, not of joy in the mead-hall, not of any noble treasure on the earth, a daughter of the king, if he possesses you.”
- 12) *The Wife’s Lament* is another exception featuring virtues of matrimony.
- 13) These lines are translated in modern English as follows: I dare promise you that you should find the glorious fidelity there. Lo! He who inscribed this on this tree commanded to beseech you, the treasure-adorned one, if you remembered, in your mind the promises that you two, on a former day, often agreed upon, while you two might have, in the mead cities, occupied the abode, inhabited in one land, displayed relationship.
- 14) These lines are translated into “A feud drove him away out of the victorious nation. Now he himself joyfully commanded that you would have stirred the sea, since you have heard, on the edge of the hillside, a sad cuckoo sing in the grove. Do not allow you to divert you from journey afterwards, a living man to hinder the course. Begin to seek the sea, the domain of a seagull; Board a ship, that you find the man from here southwards over the ocean, where the king is in expectation of you.”
- 15) Leslie pointed out an particular use of cuckoo motif in *The Husband’s Message*, mentioning “The proverb (a Swedish popular proverb) suggests that the sad cuckoo may have been known to Germanic tradition, but the Old English elegies are unique in their use of it as a literary motif; it is used, moreover, in a manner which has affinities with Old Welsh poetry, its significance in which has been pointed out by Professor Ifor Williams.... For the Welsh poets the cuckoo was a symbol of separation from loved ones. It is this aspect of the bird which is particularly appropriate to *The Husband’s Message*.” R. F. Leslie, ed., *Three Old English Elegies: The Wife’s Lament, The Husband’s Message and The Ruin* (Exeter: Short Run Press Ltd., 1988), p. 61.
- 16) In *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*, the severity of voyage in winter is eloquently recited through the poems. Although the wife’s departure takes place in spring in *The Husband’s Message*, a risk of losing life in a voyage seems to be far beyond the modern readers’ imagination.
- 17) In the introduction of *The Old English Elegies*, Klinck remarked the husband’s passion in his imperative style: “Although the poem’s language is formal, the energy of the lord’s appeal makes itself felt in the eager imperatives *ne læt, ongin, onsite* of lines 24–27.”