

# The Wife's Lament

I wrack this riddle about myself  
full miserable, my very own experience.

I can speak it—  
what I endured in misery,  
after I was grown, both new and old,  
none greater than now. Always I suffered  
the torment of my wracked ways. (ll. 1-5)

My lord departed at first, from his tribe here  
over the tossing of waves—  
I watched a sorrow at dawn  
wondering where in these lands  
my chieftain might be.  
Then I departed myself to venture,  
seeking his followers, a friendless wayfarer  
out of woeful need. (ll. 6-10)

They insinuated, the kinsmen of that man,  
by secret thought, to separate us two  
so that we two, widest apart in the worldly realm,  
should live most hatefully—and it harrowed me. (ll. 11-14)

My lord ordered me to take this grove  
for a home — very few dear to me  
in this land, almost no loyal friends. (ll. 15-17a)

Therefore my mind so miserable —  
than I met a well-suited man for myself  
so misfortunate and mind-sorrowing,  
thought kept close, plotting a crime. (17b-20)

Keeping cheery, we vowed quite often  
that none but death could separate us. (21-23a)

That soon changed...

it's now as if it had never been —  
our friendship. I must, far and near,  
endure the feuding of my dearly beloved. (ll. 23b-26)

My husband ordered me anchored  
in a woody grove, under an oak-tree  
within this earthen cave.

Ancient is the earth-hall:  
I am entirely longing— (27-29)

Dark are the valleys, the mountains so lofty,  
bitter these hovels, overgrown with thorns.  
Shelters without joy. So many times here  
the disappearance of my husband  
seizes me with a stewing. (ll. 30-33a)

All my friends dwell in the dirt,  
I loved them while they lived,  
now guarding their graves,  
when I go forth alone  
in the darkness of daybreak  
under the oak-tree  
outside this hollowed earth. (ll. 33b-36)

There I may sit a summer-long day,  
where I can weep for my exiled path,  
my many miseries—therefore I can never  
rest from these my mind's sorrowings,  
not from all these longings  
that seize me in my living. (ll. 37-41)

A young man must always be sad at heart,  
hard in the thoughts inside,  
also he must keep a happy bearing —  
but also breast-cares, suffering never-ending grief— (ll. 42-45a)

May he depend only upon himself  
for all his worldly pleasures.  
May he be stained with guilt far and wide,  
throughout the lands of distant folk,  
so that my once-friend should sit under the stony cliffs,  
rimed by storms, my weary-minded ally,  
flowed around by waters in his dreary hall. (ll. 42-50a)

My former companion may know a great mind-sorrow—  
remembering too often his joyful home. (ll. 50b-52a)

Woe be to that one who must  
wait for their beloved with longing. (ll. 52b-53)

Trans. Dr. Aaron K. Hostetter

### **Commentary by Michael R. Burch:**

"The Wife's Lament"—also known as "The Wife's Complaint"—is an Old English (i.e., Anglo-Saxon) poem from the Exeter Book, the oldest extant English poetry anthology. The Angles and Saxons were Germanic tribes and the poem is generally considered to be an elegy in the tradition of the German *frauenlied*, or "woman's song." Its main theme is the mourning of a lost or unrequited love, or perhaps a more general complaint about women being dominated by men and thus being forced to live subservient existences. (The poem may be considered an early feminist text; it is perhaps a very early precursor of *The Handmaid's Tale*.)

The Exeter Book has been dated to 960-990 AD, so the poem was probably written no later than 990 AD, and perhaps much earlier.

A woman grieves because she has been separated from her husband or lover, who is a ruler of some note. He forsook her and their people, after which she was also forced to leave, becoming a refugee. She accuses her husband's kinsmen of plotting secretly to divide the couple, causing her heart to break. She also complains that her lover ordered her to settle in a new region, where she had no friends and felt lost, alone and out of sorts. She reveals how she met another man who initially seemed like a good match for her, until he turned out to be a criminal and a fraud. Because other men held her new lover in contempt, she was forced to live in a cave. (One possible interpretation is that the "cave" is the grave, meaning that the speaker lies dead and buried, and is speaking to us "from beyond.") The wife imagines her first husband or lover to be living a similar dark existence and concludes by saying "woe be it to them who abide in longing." Another possible interpretation is that one man is being discussed, with the female speaker alternately regretting his loss and cursing him for his unfaithfulness and cruelty.

To be honest, no one can claim to know exactly what the author of "The Wife's Lament" intended. As Stephen Ramsay observed, "the correct interpretation of 'The Wife's Lament' is one of the more hotly

debated subjects in medieval studies." It has been suggested that the poem is an allegory, of the "Bride of Christ" variety—perhaps another "Song of Solomon." An alternate interpretation is that the speaker is dead, speaking to us from beyond the grave. But there is no evidence of such kinds of writing having existed in Anglo-Saxon poetry at the time the poem was written. So it seems best to apply Occam's Razor and take the speaker at her word. "The Wife's Lament" and "Wulf and Eadwacer" appear to be bitter complaints about the lot of women in a male-dominated world. Is there any reason to read them otherwise, really?

"The Wife's Lament" is similar to "The Wanderer" and "The Seafarer" in that they are three Old English/Anglo-Saxon poems that involve hard-luck "sea sagas." It has also been suggested that "The Wife's Lament" is a riddle ... but if so, it seems no one has ever solved it! It has also been suggested that the speaker is a "peace-weaver" (a woman married to a king in order to resolve a dispute between two warring tribes).