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SPINNING WHEELS, WEAVING WORDS, AND CUPBEARING: *THE WIFE'S LAMENT* AND FEMALE POWER, AGENCY AND RESISTANCE IN ANGLO-SAXON ENGLAND

A Thesis Submitted

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Designation

University Honors

Alison Leytem
Dr. Wendy Marie Hoofnagle
Department of Languages and Literatures
April 30, 2012
University of Northern Iowa

This study by Alison Leytem

Entitled: **SPINNING WHEELS, WEAVING WORDS, AND CUPBEARING: *THE WIFE'S LAMENT* AND FEMALE POWER, AGENCY AND RESISTANCE IN ANGLO-SAXON ENGLAND**

has been approved as meeting the thesis or project requirement for the Designation University Honors.

April 30, 2012, Wendy Marie Hoofnagle, Department of Languages & Literatures

5/1/12
Date Jessica Moon, Director, University Honors Program

Introduction:

Throughout Western history, it is often assumed that women had no opportunity for power or agency due to the patriarchal society in which they lived, where men controlled access to power structures.a male dominant context. Anglo-Saxon England throughout its history was a society founded on bonds of kinship and community. Women were able to wield agency by having access to specific roles *within* such a society. This privilege depended on a communal sense of duty, and men and women were symbiotic forces within the society; a division of labor was shared so that no person was left unoccupied. Although no texts remain that we can definitively assign to female authors, we can use other women-centered literature as evidence for many of this society's details concerning men and women in partnership, such as the mysterious and elegiac poem *The Wife's Lament.* A short poem found within the Exeter Book that was possibly written between 960 and 990 AD, *The Wife's Lament* seems to be a female-authored text focusing on a woman mourning the loss of her former life. It may serve as a text to be widely interpreted in order to more greatly understand female roles within the Anglo-Saxon era, especially since there is little literature available to examine real women's experiences. We may grapple with this poem for meaning, using it as a scenario that may fit into Anglo-Saxon societal context in many ways, especially as a counter-example to what would have been expected from women throughout the period.

Purpose: Looking through the lens of Anglo-Saxon womens' roles as peaceweavers, cup-bearers, inciters or "whetting women" in their ability to practice and assert power, resistance and agency within conjugal bonds with husbands or lovers, we can better understand the ambiguous Old English poem *The Wife's Lament.* By exploring the poem, documents that history has left us, and previous foundational research, I will investigate whether the role women played in Anglo Saxon society mattered, and if either way, they had significant opportunity for agency.

Hypothesis: I argue that *The Wife's Lament* is an ideal counter-example to what agency women's roles were meant to provide. In that way, it is also it also serves as a negative example of how to fulfill these roles, and what effects failure in the female role has on social cohesion.

Primary Document and Translation

The following Old English poem, *The Wife's Lament*, has been translated from the OE vernacular into modern English by R.M. Liuzza. *The Wife's Lament* was found within the Exeter Book, one of the four main Anglo-Saxon codices. Proposed dates of authorship of the Exeter Codex range from 960 to 990, however, it is believed to have been copied in 975, and given to Exeter Cathedral by Pope Leofric (Muir/Encyclopedia Britannica). However, the poems contained within the Exeter Book, including *The Wife's Lament*, may have existed in the Anglo-Saxon oral tradition long before being copied down by the scribe.

The Wife's Lament

Ic þis giedd wrece bi mē ful gēomorre,
Mīnre sylfre sīð. Ic þæt secgan mæg
hwæt ic yrmþa gebād, siþþan ic up wēox,
nīwes oþþe ealdes, no mā þonne nū.
Ā ic wite wonn mīnra wræcsīþa.

I make this song of myself, deeply sorrowing,
my own life's journey, I am able to tell
all the hardships I've suffered since I grew up,
but new or old, never worse than now—
ever I suffer the torment of my exile.

Ærest mīn hlāford gewāt heonan of lēodum
Ofer ȳþa gelāc; hæfde ic ūhtceare
hwǣr min lēodfruma londes wǣre.
Đā ic mē fēran gewāt folgað sēcan,
Winelēas wraecca for mīnre weþearfe,
ongunnon þæt þæs monnes māgas hycgan
þurh dyrne geþōht þæt hȳ tōdǣlden unc,
þæt wit gewīdost in woruldrice
lifdon lāðlicost; and mec longade.

First my lord left his people
for the tumbling waves; I worried at dawn
where on earth my leader of men might be.
When I set out myself in my sorrow,
a friendless exile, to find his retainers,
that man's kinsmen began to think
in secret that they would separate us,
so we would live far apart in this world,
most miserably, and longing seized me.

Hēt mec hlāford min hēr eard niman;
āhte ic lēofra lȳt on þissum londstede,
holdra frēonda; forþon is min hyge gēomor.
Đa ic mē ful gemǣcne monnan funde,
heardsǣligne, hygegēomorne,
mōd mīþendne, morþor hycgende,
blīþe gebǣro. Ful oft wit bēotedan
þǣt unc ne gedǣlde nemne dēaþ āna,
ōwiht elles; eft is þǣt onhworfen,
is nū fornumen swā hit nō wǣre
frēondscipe uncer. Sceal ic feor ge nēah
mīnes felalēofan fǣhðu drēogan.

My lord commanded me to live with him here;
I had few loved ones or loyal friends
in this country, which causes me grief.
Then I found that my most fitting man
Was unfortunate, filled with grief,
concealing his mind, plotting murder
with a smiling face. So often we swore
that only death could ever divide us,
nothing else—all that is changed now;
it is now as if it had never been,
our friendship. Far and near, I must
endure the hatred of my dearest one.

Heht mec mon wunian on wuda bearwe,
Under actrēo þam eoðscræfe.
Eald is þes eorðsele, eal ic eom oflongad;
Sindon dena nimme, dūna uphēa,
bitre burgtūnas brērum beweaxne,
wīc wynna lēas. Ful oft mec hē wrāþe begeat
fromsiþ frēabn. Frȳnd sind on eorþan,
lēofe lifgend, leger weardiað,
þonne ic on ūhtanāna gonge
under āctrēo geond þās eorðscrafu.
aēr ic sittan mōt sumorlangne dæg,
þaēre ic wēpan mæg mīne wræcsiþas,
earfoþa fela; forþon ic aēfre ne mæg
þaēre mōdceare minre gerestan
ne ealles þæs longaþes þe mec on þissum līfe begeat.

They forced me to live in a forest grove,
under an oak tree in an earthen cave.
This earth-hall is old, and I ache with longing;
the dales are dark, the hills too high,
harsh hedges overhung with briars,
a home without joy. Here my lord's leaving
often fiercely seized me. There are friends on earth,
lovers living who lie in their bed,
while I walk alone in the light of dawn
under the oak-tree and through this earth-cave,
where I must sit the summer-long day;
there I can weep for all my exiles,
my many troubles; and so I may never
escape from the cares of my sorrowful mind,

Ā scyle geong mon wesan gēomormōd,
Heard heortan geþōht; swylce habban sceal
Blīþe gebaēro eac þon brēostceare,
Sinsorgna gedreag; sȳ æt him sylfum gelong
Eal his worulde wyn. Sȳ ful wīde fāh
feorres folclondes þæt mīn frēond siteð
under stānhliþe storme behrīmed,
wine wēregmōd, wætre beflōwen

May the young man be sad-minded
With hard heart-thoughts, yet let him have
a smiling face along with his heartache,
a crowd of constant sorrows. Let to himself
all his worldly joys belong! Let him be outlawed
in a far distant land, so that my friend sits
under stone cliffs chilled by storms,
weary-minded, surrounded by water
the cares of a sorrowful mind; he will remember

on drēorsele, drēogeð se mīn wine
micle mōdceare; hē gemon tō oft
wynlicran wīc. Wā bið þām þe sceal
of langoþe lēofes ābidan.

in a sad dreary hall! My beloved will suffer
the cares of a sorrowful mind; he will remember
too often a happier home. Woe to the one
who must suffer longing for a loved one.

Translation: R. M. Liuzza

Literature Review:
A State of the Field for Feminist Anglo-Saxon Scholarship

Much has changed recently within the domain of feminist scholarship as applied to medieval literature. The authors of "Anglo Saxon Studies: Gender and Power: Feminism in Old English Studies," Helen Bennett, Gillian Overing and Clare Lees identify three areas of prominent scholarship concerning Anglo-Saxon women: history, literature, and language. Examining these broad categories of women, in, Bennett, Overing and Lees argue that it is not possible to feasibly study these areas in isolation; their connection is inevitable. As they explain it, "Our work shares a general concern to highlight the problems of traditional disciplines and methodologies (binarisms, and other varieties of anti-feminist criticism)" (15). With this, the authors critically examine common approaches that seem isolated and exclusive. As the field of inquiry for Anglo-Saxon studies becomes smaller, there has been less feminist study performed, either due to decreased interest or further refinement of research areas. These authors seek to organize and clarify the various research and analysis related to women in Anglo-Saxon England and identify where the field might be headed as further work is published. They begin the discussion with a look at historical scholarship.

There are three common categories of women forming the basis of historical scholarship: queens, religious women, and "ordinary women" (16); two of these distinct groups (those of secular queens and laywomen) are what I am most interested in studying, Women within a secular context seem more mysterious, especially because there is so much scholarship focused on saint's lives and women in association with the church. With recent contributions from scholars such as Doris Stenton, Margaret Clunies Ross and Pauline Stafford, I can further investigate the interrelationship between society, language, and literature's representation of women, especially in the areas of individual female rights and marriage laws. Furthermore, I

would like to follow the authors' suggestion that "feminist historians need to examine the public/private dichotomy itself: what makes the division, where the line is drawn and how divisions are made in relation to women" (17), in order to resist analyzing women in Anglo-Saxon culture within an assumed binary tradition.

Following the scholarship of Bennet, Overing and Lees, Mary Dockray-Miller discusses the paradigm shift of feminist and gender scholarship focused on medieval historical periods, particularly that of the Anglo-Saxon period, in her article "Old English Literature and Feminist Theory: A State of the Field." The early work of feminist scholars in Old English literature from the 1980s has been focused on what Allen Frantzen calls the "women in" phase of feminist criticism, studying female power without necessarily discussing context. Dockray-Miller remarks that these feminist scholars laid the groundwork for legitimizing Anglo-Saxon studies as a field of inquiry and allowed others to take their studies in new directions. The paradigm shift that Dockray-Miller proposes is one that:

> Can and should inform broader cultural understandings of the history of gender relations, despite current communication problems among the varied subfields of medieval studies and gender studies. Furthermore, the pedagogy of both medievalists and faculty specializing in later periods must be informed by this shift as well (1).

Rather than fixating on studying women in contemporary contexts within a binary gender code, Dockray-Miller supports the move toward studying within the Anglo-Saxon cultural context.

Both scholars and students studying the literature should come to realize that both men *and* women acted as agents throughout the period, as evident in contemporary texts. With this argument, Dockray-Miller provided a survey of the field, within which I will be performing most of my research. The "women in" school of early feminist literary criticism is one that I have

explored, mostly during background reading or as a first point of exploration; however, I intend to focus on women *alongside* men as agents within the context of their society, rather than in comparison to men. I hold a similar view of the field to Dockray-Miller, in that I would like to explore female agency within the Anglo-Saxon society and literature--not in comparison to males, but in relation to the unique roles that women as individuals played.

For women to be seen as individuals rather than sub-ordinates in the kinship society, things would have to change within the social and the legal code. Suzanne Fonay Wemple discusses the Germanic tribes' adaptation of the Roman system of law and how the Germanic customs prevailed. Like Bennet, Overing, and Lees (1990), Wemple discusses the position of the noble woman as well as how the incorporation into feudal customs set to define the rights of women in relation to men. Though the author pays a small amount of attention to women in secular Germanic society (Merovingians, Carolingians, Franks), the Anglo-Saxons are not specifically discussed until the subject of monasticism is addressed. Here, Wemple identifies Christianity's new influence on women, especially in providing an alternative to marriage. Close association of the sexes was to be prevented within the walls of the male and female monasteries, and often women were placed within the monasteries by parents or family. The author notes that women in monasteries were also heralded for their weaving, spinning, and other artistic endeavors, traditions for which secular Anglo-Saxon women were also revered.

This piece, while including a survey of information focused upon Western women from the fifth to the tenth century, does not hone in and detail Anglo-Saxon women in the secular society; However, this work did give considerable insight towards the influence of Christianity on marriage laws, and therefore provides a pattern of change in the law codes that I may continue to observe. Though I will not be focusing exclusively on women within the religious area of

society, it cannot be denied that Christianity had an influence on the changing shape of society as a whole. With this knowledge, I may be able to be more selective about the other female figures I choose to examine, in relation to *The Wife's Lament.*

Female Rights, In and Out of Marriage

Marie-Françoise Alamichel focuses primarily on property rights and inheritance codes for women in Anglo-Saxon culture in her chapter, "The Economic (In)Dependence of Widows," from *Widows in Anglo-Saxon and Medieval Britain.* Alamichel's book examines widowhood in Anglo-Saxon England, and this particular chapter analyzes evidence pertaining to their economic rights, and status. The statistical evidence derived from analyses of wills, property agreements, and marriage documents shows a pattern of positive relationships between women and their husbands. This chapter initially piquedmy interest in the changing perceptions and roles of women through the Anglo-Saxon period. These include influences by new laws from kings, as well as changes that the spread of Christianity influenced in the population over time. Alamichel's investigation of the various Anglo-Saxon law codes also gave me a base from which to gather legal information, highlighting specific documents where female rights (especially marriage and property) could be observed. These documents may provide support for my examination of women's rights as wives, a significant role in the society.

In order to secure widows a comfortable future, marriage agreements, according to Alamichel, were often a financial arrangement or "economic co-operation" (103) between two families rather than a union for mutual affection. However, unions always had the potential to be broken by death; a widow (along with her children, if any) needed a living to sustain her after the husband's death. Anglo-Saxon marriage codes arranged for preparations such as these, and, according to Alamichel, "it has often been noted that husbands were particularly generous with their wives, always bequeathing them large parts of their property" (108). In representation of

10th and 11th century wills, Alamichel includes a table presenting to whom testators/testatrixes (will-writers or legacy-givers) commonly bequeathed their property. In 12 wills written by men (3 were most likely widowers), wives were the most common recipients, being chosen 10 out of 12 times. The table confirms the fact that husbands favored their wives over other close relatives, perhaps to ensure their (and any children's) safety and wellbeing after a husband's death. With adequate property and finances, a widow could be assured a sense of independence in her widowhood, instead of dependence on community or kin.

Sexual relationships between men and women could exist within the confines of marriage, or within an arrangement involving a concubine. In her chapter, "Sex and Marriage," from *Women in Anglo-Saxon England,* Christine Fell begins her discussion of by pointing out two errors commonly made in modern examinations of law-codes of the time. The first is the assumption that all pre-Conquest societies are the same, single society and their laws are the same throughout the period. The second is the assumption that progress is represented through the laws as society proceeded and that laws in the late Anglo-Saxon period, such as the laws of Ælfred, represent a regular development from earlier laws of Æþelbert, developed and refined as the years progressed. Fell follows these precautions with a discussion of marriage laws and agreements at different points in Anglo-Saxon cultural history. She makes specific mention of the *morgengifu* (the payment to the bride by her groom before marriage) and its importance in a marriage arrangement between a man, his intended, and his intended's father and kin. The *morgengifu* provides direct evidence for females being allotted tangible agency within their marriages, and within society itself.

Fell's identification of the commonly made errors in examining Anglo-Saxon law codes (concerning marriage especially) has allowed me to resist such assumptions in my initial study of

female representation within the society. Like Fell, I will examine the Anglo-Saxon law codes in order to observe and analyze patterns of development in the rights of women in marriage agreements. Fell has provided a vast amount of information and discussion on the topic of Anglo-Saxon women in general, yet has also provided focused insight on these women in the context of their daily lives, and their relationships with men. However, I will go further in hopes of finding increased evidence for individual female property and civil rights. I wish to further explore Fell's book, and identify my own observations of women in the Anglo-Saxon literature, not necessarily in comparison to men, but as individuals in their own right.

In contrast to Fell's discussion of male-female relationships within marriage, Margaret Clunies Ross's article, "Concubinage in Anglo-Saxon England" explores various historical attitudes toward polygyny and concubinage in Anglo-Saxon England, in both Christianized and pre-Christian contexts. Depending on the date of documents and materials being examined, there is considerable variation in societal attitudes towards concubines, their acceptability fading as the Anglo-Saxon society is further Christianized. Ross points out that the very early vernacular Laws of Æthelberht provide a substantial clue for traditional Anglo-Saxon attitudes towards forms of sexual union. The constraints on property rights were outlined in marriage codes, but the sexual union itself was quite vague, within or outside marriage. The silence in early codes suggests that concubinage, though perhaps not legally sanctioned, was certainly recognized and a common custom, particularly among higher social classes. Ross admits that the fragmentary nature of evidence concerning concubinage makes it difficult to determine exactly how frequently it occurred in Anglo-Saxon society; however, a "gradual, reluctant but nevertheless radical social change" (34) occurred, undoubtedly at the entrance of the Christian church.

Clunies Ross's study of female concubinage again introduces an additional role of Anglo-Saxon women to be considered in my research. Though the author notes that as concubines' acceptability faded as Christianity gained hold on society, I would like to find out if their "occupations" had any effect on rights and status within the kinship culture. Due to the steadfast communal environment, as well as the family-oriented nature of a kinship culture, the position of concubine is an interesting one. Clunies Ross also identifies the silence concerning sexual expectation within marriage codes, which may assist me in placing *The Wife's Lament* in context.

The Female Represented in Literature

Richard and Fiona Gameson explore the two most ambiguous and debated pieces of Old English poetry in their article, "*Wulf and Eadwacer, The Wife's Lament*, and the discovery of the individual in Old English verse." Their intent is not to quibble over more problems that seem insoluble, but to examine the evidence we *do* have and reconsider what it tells us. The authors suggest that both poems may have female authors and exist as examples of "highly subjective works in which individual character, emotion, and interpersonal relationships are the subject matter" (468). *The Wife's Lament*, because of certain Old English literary features (its substantial inclusion of feminine first-person pronouns and possessive adjectives), implies that the poem is autobiographical. An exclusive feature in both poems' content is the subjectivity of female emotions. The Gamesons speculate that women may be more likely to prefer psychology, emotions, and interpersonal relationships rather than "action" when communicating their feelings, and that this notion supports the case of female authorship in *Wulf and Eadwacer* and *The Wife's Lament*.

The article sheds light on two poems most crucial to my study of women in Anglo-Saxon England: *The Wife's Lament* and *Wulf and Eadwacer*. I was particularly interested in the

Gameson article because it began examining the female subjects of the Old English poems as individuals. Their examination of evidence indicating female emotional subjectivity gave me the idea to examine representations of women in Anglo-Saxon England as individuals capable of agency through their emotions and communication through their relationships. There may be additional literary examples of this type of female individualism and emotional agency, beginning with *Beowulf*'s queen Wealþeow.

Following the focus of Richard and Fiona Gameson, Helene Scheck's article, "Seductive Voices: Rethinking Female Subjectivities in *The Wife's Lament* and *Wulf and Eadwacer*," provides a summative exploration among recent scholarship surrounding these two memorable poems. Scheck makes no attempt to explicitly support any view, but instead considers the questions that these poems may raise, and their potential to expand understanding on the subjective female role in Anglo-Saxon England. In their active expression of sorrow, the speakers of *Wulf and Eadwacer* and *The Wife's Lament* remove themselves from passivity and victimization, and instead place themselves in the position of empowered protest. Scheck points out that these two poems, though the best candidates for female-authorship in Old English poetry, are also "the best candidates for male-authored manipulation of the female subject through literary representation" (224). *The Wife's Lament* is particularly appealing to examine in this fashion, due to its ambiguity and mystery.

In my exploration of these two equivocal poems, I will consider them as representations of Anglo-Saxon women within the kinship cultural context. If viewed in this way, the poems could have served as warning for women of the time, that they were subject to male guardians and that whatever power they were able to find was as vulnerable as these poems' subjects. Though readers may never know the "real story" of the poets, questions surrounding both poems

can help enhance further understanding of Anglo-Saxon culture and the women within it. I will further consider the evidence that the text might provide for an indication of mutual appreciation and duty in marriage relationships. Scheck emphasizes the subjectivity of the female role, but I will look for any evidence that might indicate resistance to this subjective vulnerability.

Jane Chance explores the Anglo-Saxon social ideal of the aristocratic woman, or *ides*, in relation to a woman's role in society. In a situation of peace-weaving, the marriage was the chief arrangement of establishing friendly, or at least civil, relations between two opposing tribes. The *ides*' main role was to be this physical peace-weaver, either by existing in the position of level-headed agency, as Wealþeow exemplified in *Beowulf*, or additionally bearing children so that the two tribes' blood was "mingled" and the heir was the living, physical evidence of the peace between them. Noble, peace-weaving women were meant to keep peace as an ideal, while their husbands were required for battle: "The *ides* must be not only passive and peacemaking, but usually also chaste and often holy, qualities that compelled her husband to keep her from assault by marauders" (7). While the *ides* were meant to keep peace, it did not mean that real women always remained faithful within marriage. Chance brings up the possible adulterous situation within *The Wife's Lament* as an example of failed *ides* peace-weaving behavior.

If the speaker in *The Wife's Lament* was initially a bride meant to be a peace-weaver between tribes, her situation indicates that her attempt to actually serve her purpose was unsuccessful. As Chance points out, there was certainly the possibility that the peace-weaving *ides* did not remain chaste and faithful within marriage, and this would have been detrimental to the bond between tribes. In viewing the speaker's own situation in *The Wife's Lament*, I think it is important to consider that she may have had very good intentions to maintain peace, especially since she seems to regard her husband very fondly in her nostalgic lamentation. This being said, I

see Chance's article assisting me to dismiss a view of the wife as adulterous. I maintain that her peace-weaving has failed because her husband's kin has succeeded in demonizing her, both as a foreigner and as a woman unfit in her position, and their conniving has been the root of her exile.

Marilyn Desmond examines *The Wife's Lament* and *Wulf and Eadwacer* from a different feminist perspective, beginning with a reference to Virginia Woolf's vision of "Anon" as both a man and woman in literary history. The two Anglo-Saxon *frauenlieder,* meaning "women's songs," "illustrate the fate of the female-voiced anonymous lyric in current literary histories" (574). Desmond argues that inside a literary history conventionally based around a masculine ideology, women have generally been excluded or minimized as subjects, authors, voices or characters. In the case of *The Wife's Lament* and *Wulf and Eadwacer*, "these two texts must be read as texts that encode a female voice within a particular patriarchy, particularly the Anglo-Saxon patriarchy, a Germanic culture notable.... for the autonomy, responsibility, and legal protection available to women" (584). With this information in mind, Desmond goes on to assert that women are already in a position of "exile from which they must reclaim their identity: "The voice of exile in these poems is not a veiled, inner voice but a public rhetorical one" (590). Reading the poems in women's language opens up a new venue in feminist literary history, one that may include such antiquated texts as these two Anglo-Saxon poems.

In reading Desmond's article, I was particularly interested in her discussion of the woman's position within patriarchal society, and marriage roles between husband and wife. It seems that, though women enjoyed some level of autonomy, they were still unequal to men in most other senses. In giving these women a "voice" within literature, I agree with Desmond's point about their existing position of exile, especially as she discusses both speakers' grief in their physical exile and isolation: "The female exile expresses no philosophical basis for hope:

hers is an exile so pervasive, an exile so thoroughly inscribed in her language and in her culture, that her elegiac vision cannot include expressions of consolation" (588). However, I do not necessarily agree with her explanation of the female lamentation, because I see the female voice in *The Wife's Lament* as one addressing both herself rhetorically *and* her husband, wherever he is. Desmond's article gave me yet another angle from which to consider the relationship between the speaker and her husband, and her final message, to both in consolation with her husband and herself.

A chapter in Joseph and Frances Gies' book, *Marriage and Family in the Middle Ages*, surveys the law codes, contracts, and cultural practices of marriage and sexuality within the Anglo-Saxon culture. Though the purpose of marriage varied, especially between classes in society, Gies and Gies provide an array of excerpts from sources, such as the Laws of Æthelberht, Cnut, and Alfred, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle,* and the *Exeter Book,* to display different attitudes and perceptions of the union between a man and a woman. They dissect the agreements between kin in the peace-weaving arrangement, as well as different scenarios for noble and common marriages. Affection between husband and wife is evident in the chronicles as well, presenting alternative reasons for marriage apart from those that were arranged for financial means. Gies and Gies cite the example of Hildemer caring for his insane wife, weeping when he believed she was dying. It seems that affection was not always traveling from female to male; men displayed their appreciation for wives as well.

Gies and Gies bring up an important point about Anglo-Saxon marriage, especially in their considerations of affectionate relationships between husbands and wives. The marriage bond may have been used to strengthen relationships between opposing kin, but mutual affection may have also been present, or risen, from the unions. Since husbands could choose to whom

they left their inheritances, there may have been competition between the speaker of *The Wife's Lament* and her husband's kinsmen. We may not know just how eager for loot either of these parties was, but the family may have tried to harm or frame the speaker to be closer in line for inheritance. We won't ever know, because *The Wife's Lament* begins the way it does, but I argue that the husband is acting in a manner designed to keep his wife safe. As kinship was the strongest and most central aspect of Anglo-Saxon culture, we can understand the husband's decision to protect his wife, which promotes the symbiotic relationship between husbands and wives.

Foundational Interpretations and Background

Due to *The Wife's Lament*'s significant ambiguity in terms of authorship and meaning, it has occupied a position as one of the most complicated and puzzling poems in the Old English lexicon. Scholars have offered a variety of interpretations in an attempt to identify the poem's speaker and its message, and to investigate its significance in Anglo-Saxon society. Scholars have moved from viewing the "wife" as a failed peace-weaver, cast out due to her loss of favor from her husband's kin, to a woman who is in exile lamenting her *hlaford* and *freond*, which could be her husband *or* her lover. The speaker's identity is as debated as *whom* she is lamenting specifically. Additionally, the arguments surrounding *The Wife's Lament* bring into question the possibility of the woman being either a wife or a concubine. In terms of power and agency being acquired and asserted by women of the period, depending on the interpretation one takes, *The Wife's Lament* may provide just as good of a *counter-example* for female agency as it does an example.

The problem with *The Wife's Lament* is that readers only meet the speaker *after* she has done whatever it was that placed her in exile. Due to the ambiguity of her current situation, there are three common interpretations of the poem that I wish to address. First is the interpretation of

a wife cast out of her husband's family or favor due to her failure as a peace-weaver. Peace-weaving as a societal custom will be explored more deeply later on in this paper. Another, less common interpretation of *The Wife's Lament* considers that the speaker may have been a failed inciter (woman who initiates action through exhortation), similar to the way in which she may have failed in peace-weaving. The inciter role has been supported by the least amount of scholarship that I have been able to find, yet is still viable to consider, especially in terms of an important role of women during the time period.

A final common interpretation of the poem holds that the woman speaks of not one, but two men, both "a lover, referred to in lines 18-26 and 42-52, and her husband elsewhere in the poem" (Leslie 3). Her lamentation may be due to her sadness at one man's absence abroad, and her inability to reach the other here at home; however, scholars have still argued that the language in the poem suggests that the two men are actually one man, who may or may not be the speaker's husband. This brings forth the possibility that the woman may not be a wife at all, but a woman who has a close sexual relationship with her *hlaford*, insinuating her role as a possible concubine in his household. This interpretation, that of the "wife" filling the role of concubine, has proven to be the most intriguing to me in my research, especially in the area of comparing wives' roles in Anglo-Saxon society to that of women who were concubines.

It is extremely important to also point out that there has been much feminist scholarship conducted on *The Wife's Lament* in the past. The previously addressed interpretations are included in several feminist readings of the poem, such as those by Jane Chance, Barrie Ruth Straus, and Alexandra Hennessy Olsen. Since a feminist approach to interpreting history and literature is oftentimes misunderstood to audiences, Olsen provides her explanation of the approach:

> I would like to define 'feminist' as an approach that acknowledges that a work of poetry or fiction (whether authored by a man or by a woman) can include a female point of view. Literature reflects life, and there have been biases in traditional approaches to literature that have defined genres and characters only in respect to a particular masculine perspective. A feminist reading is an attempt to recover the nature of the feminine in earlier societies, thereby giving a truer picture of women and men in those societies than we have had heretofore. By making visible the whole experience of women and men in the past, we learn that women have not been peripheral to human society and gain an appreciation of the nature of men as well (67-68).

I include this explanation because I favor this method of interpretation in my own research, and follow the theory within my examination of *The Wife's Lament*. It also provides readers with a reminder not to automatically compare women to a binary, masculine code. Such a society did not exist within Anglo-Saxon England, it seems, until the widespread adoption of Christianity, and even after this shift, society couldn't be so starkly divided.

Woman as Peace-weaver and Cupbearer

The Anglo-Saxon culture is rich and deeply steeped in tradition. One of the most prominent customs in Germanic, and more specifically Anglo-Saxon history is that of peace-weaving. In Old English, 'freoðwebba' or 'fri□ðowebba' has been translated to mean "peace-weaver," weaving the bonds of peace together between hostile nations. In marriages between tribes, Kathleen Herbert describes the Anglo-Saxon peace-weaver archetype as "the royal bride who holds out her hands in welcome to bring warring tribes together in friendship at her wedding feast" (7). Within their roles as peace-weavers, these women were intelligent, wary individuals,

who acted in order to preserve positive relationships between peoples, and to protect their community from strife.

Occupationally, women in the Anglo-Saxon tradition have been closely associated with spinning and weaving cloth, a task that parallels their peace-weaving role. Peace-weaving was not strictly reserved to aristocratic women, though the most notable literary and historical examples of peace-weavers happen to be. The angel messenger in the poem, *Elene,* is a *male* peace-weaving figure, asking Constantine to accept Christianity and defeat the Huns, explained by L. John Sklute as an indication that "he is weaving together a peace between God and man" (205). However, women in the society's domestic duties seem more suitably associated with peace-weaving. Victoria Wodzak points out the suitable metaphor of weaving within the female domain: "As a metaphor, weaving is pervasive and truly appropriate. The act of weaving draws together useless, disparate threads through the exchanging, from side to side, of a thread-laden shuttle, to produce strong, durable, useful fabric. Thus we have weavers of tales, of plots, of fate, of peace" (256). Just as women were literal weavers, making the fabric to clothe their families and ensure their comfort, they also stood to embody the metaphorical weaver, a weaver of peace and harmony within their community and kin.

Within the heroic code of the Anglo-Saxons, women were more closely associated with peace-weaving, especially women occupying particular positions in the aristocracy, most notably queens. However, as Sklute points out in his article "Freo□webba in Old English Poetry" peaceweaving may be primarily associated with the female domain, "but the acts they perform are not [necessarily] concerned with marriage" (207). Peace-weaving was often employed as a way to fuse relationships and diffuse animosity, but peace-weavers themselves functioned as

mediators for issues more central to the heroic domain. These figures set out to promote harmony and good relations between peoples using well-placed words and influence.

The heroic and the domestic domains of Anglo-Saxon society were, as Victoria Wodzak points out, dependent on one another for survival (256). In order to ensure the preservation and perpetuation of the society, wars would ensue, so that tribes could continue their existence and people's safety. The heroic domain contained these warriors, more closely associated with establishing freedom for society through exclusive fighting, using strength and physical action to acquire victory. Peace-weavers existed most often within the domestic domain, less associated with physical aggression. Opposite the heroic code, Jane Chance suggests that the peace-weaver represents "the tension between passivity and aggression, between social and anti-social behavior, between passion and reason" (11). In this "in-between" stage, the peace-weaver becomes the effort to confront the heroic domain and use negotiation to end conflict.

The social role of the peace-weaver is an undeniable feature of the Anglo-Saxon culture. In such a heroic code, it may seem interesting that such a figure could exist. Yet, as mentioned earlier, it seems as though both sides of society, the heroic and the domestic, were interdependent and *had* to exist. Jane Chance mentions that the failure or success of a peace-weaver is "interdependent on [the actions] of lord and retainer, without whose willingness peace-making is futile" (111). If a peace-weaving marriage is made in order to establish good relations between two groups, the cooperation of the woman, her kin *and* her new husband (her lord), is necessary. Without acknowledging a peace-weaver's words and efforts to weave peace, failure is inevitable.

Probably the most recognizable figure of peace-weaving that exists in the Anglo-Saxon literary lexicon is Hrothgar's queen, Wealþeow, from the epic poem, *Beowulf.* Queen Wealþeow has been called *frithusibb*, a peace pledge between Wylflings and the Syldings. In the poem, she

is both referred to as "the lady of the Helmings" (line 620) of the Wylfling clan of Helm by heritage, and "the lady of the Scyldings" (1168), the Danish queen by marriage. The *Beowulf* poet, by referencing Wealþeow by both these names, illustrates the queen's dual position as a member of both domains, linking them together with her counsel and presence.

In addition to her peace-weaving marriage to Hrothgar, Wealþeow goes on to display further approaches to establish peace between forces in *Beowulf.* Her speech and actions are especially evident in the mead-hall, where she fulfills the position of royal cupbearer during Hrothgar's feasts in praise of Beowulf and his men. Following the death of Grendel by Beowulf's sword, Hrothgar presents feast where Wealþeow enters, presenting the hero Beowulf with a golden crown. She proceeds to speak:

> I wish thee well, / and rich in treasure; be you to my sons / indulgent in deeds, possessing joy; / here is each of the men true to the others / generous in mind, in the protection of their liege-lord; / the thanes are united, the people alert, / the warrior-retinue cheered by drink, do as I bid. (1216-1231).

She asks him to continue his leadership and friendship with the Danes and to protect them, particularly her sons. She is also wary of Beowulf's claim to succession, as Hrothgar has ceremoniously "adopted" the hero as one of his own, and wants to appeal to him in order to give her sons the best chance for survival. After Wealþeow's speech is given, Beowulf goes forth to face Grendel's mother, a female figure who is *not* a peace-weaver. He is acting in order to reclaim the peace that has been broken by such a monster. Wealþeow's speech succeeds in swaying Beowulf *away* from challenging order in Hrothgar's home at Heorot, and he returns home, preserving his relationship with the Danes, and with queen Wealhþeow herself.

In contrast to the successful peace-weaving embodied by Wealþeow, *Beowulf* contains the tale of the Frisian queen Hildeburh, a woman who exemplified failed peace-weaving behaviors. This woman was also given in marriage to a member of another tribe, the Frisians, by her Danish father, King Hoc. Within *Beowulf,* King Hrothgar's *scop*, his bard, sings of the sad tale of Hildeburh: "Hnæf, prince of the Danes, is visiting is sister Hildeburh at the home of her husband Finn, king of the Frisians. While there, the Danish party is treacherously attacked; after five days of fighting Hnæf lies dead, along with many casualties on either side. Hnæf's retainer Hengest is left to lead the remnant of Danish survivors" (*Beowulf* 52, footnote 4). Hildeburh's son is killed within the fray by her Danish people, whom she left when she married Finn. Here, she is unable to prevent the fight from occurring, and though we have no overt evidence of her action, it seems that Hildeburh failed to find opportunity for peace-weaving. The sad outcome is that both her brother Hnæf and her son lie dead, to be burned on the same funeral pyre.

Historically, one of the most widely known peace-weavers during the Anglo-Saxon age came towards the end, just years before the Norman Invasion of 1066. Queen Emma of Normandy was married to England's Æthelred the Unready, his second wife from 1002-1016AD. Following her marriage to Æthelred, Emma married Cnut the Great of Denmark in 1017, an action that may be read as a peace-weaving behavior similar to that expected from earlier royal women. During Cnut's invasion of London in 1016, Æthelred died and Emma was left with her children, sending her two sons back to Normandy to ensure their safety. Cnut had become interested in Emma for her beauty and due to the fact that she had already occupied the position once before. Additionally, Cnut desired her for her expertise in English politics, but also to direct family support from her royal sons elsewhere (Stafford 40). Emma's decision to marry Cnut was made in order to protect her sons Edward and Alfred, whom Cnut did not want in line

to inherit the throne. Though Emma was obviously opposed the Cnut's succession, she displayed admirable peace-weaving by going through with the marriage.

Peace-weaving behavior carried out by queens like Emma historically support the archetype in a positive light. Unlike the failed peace-weaving outcomes of both Wealþeow and Hildeburg in *Beowulf,* queen Emma's decision to marry Cnut demonstrates the power a successful peace-weaver was capable of wielding. Within the historical text *Encomium Emmae Reginae*, written around 1041 by a monk of St. Omer the marriage outcome is described:

> Gaul, rejoiced, the land of the English rejoiced likewise, when so great an ornament was conveyed over the seas. Gaul, I say, rejoiced to have brought forth so great a lady, and one worthy of so great a king, the country of the English indeed rejoiced to have received such a one into its towns. What an event, sought with a million prayers, and at length barely brought to pass under the Saviour's favouring grace! This was what the army had long eagerly desired on both sides, that is to say that so great a lady, bound by a matrimonial link to so great a man, worthy of her husband as he was worthy of her, should lay the disturbances of war to rest (107).

Not only was she able to save her sons' lives, Emma was also able to end the dispute between the Danes and the English. Emma is thought "worthy of her husband as he was worthy of her," and is in essence equated with Cnut. She has also brought an end to the bloodshed, allowing for "the disturbances of war to rest." Such descriptions give evidence to both the queen's own accolades, and the saving power of her peace-weaving behavior.

Due to the importance of peace-weaving within the Anglo-Saxon tradition, it is quite possible for us to view the woman in *The Wife's Lament* as one of these peace-weavers. However, as the success of any peace-weaver is dependent not only on her words and efforts to

maintain harmony between groups, but also on the willingness for those involved to listen and maintain reason, the poem provides evidence that the woman may be reacting to a situation of her own failed peace-weaving. It is obvious that peace-weaving can end in only two outcomes: either peace is established and maintained, or peace reigns temporarily, with tensions building back up for later bloodshed. Women who properly occupied and fulfilled the peace-weaving role were able to maintain the marriage, and were highly regarded within their kin and community, even considered "queenly" (Herbert 20). The grief and solitude of the speaker better aligns with the interpretation of an unsuccessful peace-weaving situation, and therefore an unsuccessful peace-weaver.

If one chooses to examine *The Wife's Lament* as a poem displaying a failed peace-weaving arrangement, one must choose to interpret the male subject/subjects in the poem as one man, that of the speaking wife's husband. Marriages established for peace-weaving purposes indisputably contained both a husband and his wife. For the purpose of this section, the woman may be identified as a literal wife. Initially, the wife laments: *Ǣrest mīn hlāford gewāt heonan of lēodum / Ofer ȳþa gelāc; hæfde ic ūhtceare / hwǣr min lēodfruma londes wǣre* ("First my lord left his people/ for the tumbling waves; I worried at dawn/ where on earth my leader of men might be," 6-8), possibly indicating that her husband has left for battle. In a peace-weaving situation, the marriage is intended to establish peace between two groups, and therefore abolish any need for physical war. Since her *hlaford,* which can be translated as "lord" or "husband," has gone away, that may indicate that war was once again necessary. If successful peace-weaving had been maintained, such action may not have been required of him.

After her first mention of her sad situation's context, the speaker begins to reveal more of her tragic tale. The audience learns that she has been brought to this land at the request of her

lord, which I interpret to be her father. She explains: *Hēt mec hlāford min hēr eard niman; / āhte ic lēofra lȳt on þissum londstede, / holdra frēonda; forþon is min hyge gēomor* ("My lord commanded me to live with him here; / I had few loved ones or loyal friends / in this country, which causes me grief" 15-17). She was brought to live here probably because of a peace-weaving marriage, since allies could be established through the union and mixing of the blood of two opposing groups. Having few loved ones or loyal friends only supports this notion, because having no family of your own in the foreign land of one's husband would be undoubtedly depressing. Her grief is well warranted if this is the case, and may prove to be her own fault.

The grief and punishment that the wife endures at the hands of her husband's kin also illustrates how her peace-weaving efforts may have failed. When coming into a marriage relationship, it was ideal for a new wife to make positive ties with her husband's family, since she has newly entered into their domain. According to the wife's lamentation within the poem, *ongunnon þæt þæs monnes māgas hycgan / þurh dyrne ġeþōht þæt hȳ tōdǣlden unc / þæt wit ġewīdost in woruldrīċe* ("that man's kinsmen began to think / in secret that they would separate us, / so we would live far apart in the world" 11-13). It is possible that she may not have made the efforts to connect with her newly-acquired kin, and this would have been a deviation from the communal tradition.

Woman as Inciter or "Whetting Woman"

An older archetype within the Anglo Saxon tradition stems from the Old Norse figures of "inciters" or "whetting women." Inciter figures abound in both history and literature, but the female inciter was especially considered a fixture of Old Norse saga. "Whetting woman" relates to the concept of a whetstone, an object that sharpens implements to prepare them for use. These figures' responsibility was to goad men into action, to negotiate and push for action when one

might have otherwise remained static (Short n.p.). As an inciter, one would goad and even taunt in order to achieve a behavior of some kind, usually one of overt action, such as going into battle or facing a difficult situation. Though one must be careful not to simply transport such aspects of an archetype completely into Anglo-Saxon culture, it cannot be denied that the female inciter figure *did* appear in the Old English lexicon, and therefore, Anglo-Saxon society itself.

The "whetting woman" female inciter has long been a part of the Germanic literary tradition, beginning with Old Norse sagas and arriving in Anglo-Saxon literature because of the common Germanic roots. These commonalities lay especially in the similarity of a heroic code and the consecrated concept of the comitatus; the loyal bond between lord and retainers is paralleled in relationships between women and men. The Roman historian Tacitus first observed the Germanic peoples' regard for female opinion and counsel in his work *Germania.* Though these were not directly the Angles or the Saxons, they were predecessors of the region (Stenton, 1). He noted that women of first century CE Germany were effective at upbraiding warriors who had become fearful and sought retreat: "It is related how on certain occasions their forced already turned to flight and retreating have been rallied by the women who implored them by their prayers and bared their breasts to their weapons...Further, they believe that the sex [female] has a certain sanctity and prophetic gift, and they neither despise their counsels nor disregard their answers" (Herlihy 24). It seems that in many cases women were the reasons that battles were not retreated and lost, but pursued and won.

Taunters are closely related to inciters, because both fulfill a similar purpose: to cause a subject to gather up strenth and courage and go forth to face adversity. While an inciter would focus more on positive inspiration and empowerment, a taunter may jab and antagonize an audience until action occurred. Michael Murphy offers the *Illiad*'s Aeneas as a male example of

one who boasts and taunts, vowing over wine that he will fight the fearsome and powerful warrior Achilles man to man. In a way, he is inciting himself by boasting, psychologically taunting himself by expressing his desire to enter such an intense challenge and come out victorious (106). Loss would indicate weakness, and in a heroic code, losing is the least desirable outcome. The concept of incitement, though not necessarily a direct synonym of boasting or taunting, seemed to fulfill a similar purpose in Anglo-Saxon England. It can be seen to exist across cultures, especially as a technique employed by women.

The role of taunter or inciter can be seen as a feature of a heroic society. Men and women occupied the role. The angel messenger from the poem, *Elene*, as I discussed in the position of peace-weaving earlier, can also be viewed as a type of inciter. This messenger comes down from heaven to Constantine in a dream, offering a *sigores taken* 'sign of victory' (85a), in the form of a shining tree, *se blaca beam* (91a), suggesting and inciting him with such a sign to indicate coming victory of Constantine over the Huns (Lionarons 54). Constantine is so moved by this vision as to make the choice to convert to Christianity, thanks to the angel's "whetting" actions.

The Old Norse mythical valkyrie offers a useful example of a powerful inciter figure by which Anglo-Saxon women may have been influenced. Valkyries, referred to both as *ides* in Old English and *idisi* in Old German, are "armed, powerful, priestly. They function as arrangers of destinies and intermediaries between men and the deity" (Damico 176). These figures functioned as "brides and guardians of the hero and whose environment is the course as well as the battlefield" (Damico 176-177). Looking at this description, Anglo-Saxon inciters share several responsibilities; duties included their upbraiding, encouragement and inspiration through speech paralleling the awe that the valkyries inspired in men.

The valkyries of the Eddic heroic, part of the Old Norse poetic tradition, are "figures of the royal court, with ties and obligations to a worldly environment...As Odin's maids, they determine the outcome of central issues that concern the Germanic warrior society—battle and the warrior's afterlife. In all respects, their roles are consonant with the subject matter of the poems—heroic deeds in battle," (Damico 181). Similarly, the female inciter held the responsibility of essentially "firing up" their husbands and male warriors. Without such inciting, there appears the possibility of warriors going into battle with fear, low spirits and little confidence, or not going to battle at all. Anglo-Saxon women in a position to incite men would have been fairly familiar with the valkyrie archetype, and rather than appearing striking, winged, with dignity and radiance, would offer careful, empowering words as a way to call warriors to battle.

Warriors and battle calls have been common themes in biblical narratives. The figure of Judith is featured in both the Deuterocanonical Book of Judith and the Old English lexicon, within the poem of the same name. Originally, the biblical tale portrays Judith as an Israelite widow who saves her people from Nebuchadnezzar's army by seducing the general Holofernes and beheading him while he drunkenly sleeps. After the army is drinking in the camp, Holofernes becomes very drunk and, recalling her beauty and lusting after her, requests the Jewish woman Judith be brought to his tent. When she is finally brought to him, he collapses out of sheer drunkenness. It is here that Judith makes her move to end the life of Holofernes. The reversal of roles, Judith acting as warrior-woman and Holofernes' being the victim, places her in a great position of power. After the beheading, she steals away through the camp and heads home to Bethulia.

As Judith demonstrates with the murder of Holofernes, women as powerful warrior figures

did exist within a Christian context. Helen Damico points out that "the Norse and Anglo-Saxon characters [notably Judith] are parallel in their physical appearance, in qualities, status, and, in particular, activity. These likenesses suggest that both the pagan and Christian warrior-maids may be related to the same conventional stock character—the Germanic warrior woman" (Damico 183). Judith's splendid adornments emphasize her grace and beauty, attributes shared by the valkyries, meant to draw attention and hold it fast, in order to deliver further messages or meaning. Her cleverness and intelligence suggest that she is eloquent, a characteristic that would have given an inciter an advantage during her appeals to an audience. She is called *snotor* ('wise,', 'intelligent,', 'brilliant') on her way to Holofernes' tent, and again after he has been beheaded. She is also called *seoro□oned* ('clever minded,' 'clear minded,') and *geor□oncolre* ('quick witted' and 'ingenious') later when the "whole nation of noble clans" (line 323) honor Judith with rings and adornments.

Judith comes to occupy the position of inciter when she carries the head of Holofernes back to Bethulia. Her valor and intelligence equate her with the valkyrie figures, and her words to her people follow that of a true inciter, filled with power, encouragement, and hope. Upon her return, she announces her triumph, and attributes it to God. Judith calls upon the Israelites to gather strength to face the coming Assyrian army. She speaks, holding Holofernes' bloody head high for all to see:

> Victory famed troops, valiant commanders: / here you can see the heathen warrior's / head before you. Yes, Holofernes / now lies lifeless. Our most loathsome foe, / who committed more murder than any man on earth, / caused us grievous pain and had plotted more / grief than before, but God refused / him longer life—didn't let him commit / more atrocity: for I took his life / with the help of God. Now each good man here / in this town dwelling: I tell

you all, / shield-bearing men you must make haste now / and gird for war. (176-188)

With this empowering and motivational speech, Judith displays just how powerful a "whetting woman" inciter figure may be, even without existing in a heroic context, like those of the Old Norse or Anglo-Saxons. Her actions and agency with her people echo the valkyries' strength, but are carried out with the grace of a queen.

Queen Emma of Normandy displayed some of the cleverest negotiation during her time between husbands. After the death of her first husband King Æthelred the Unready of England, Emma was pursued by Cnut the Great of Denmark. Emma knew that Cnut wanted to eliminate all rival claimants to his throne, so after Cnut claimed the English throne, Emma sent her sons to Normandy. However, before she would agree to marry Cnut, she considered her two sons and their futures. The *Encomium Emmae Reginae* includes details of the terms Emma established before she agreed to marry Cnut:

> But she refused ever to become the bride of Knutr, unless he would affirm to her by oath, that he would never set up the son of any wife other than herself to rule after him, if it happened that God should give her a son by him. For she had information that the king had had sons by some other woman; so she, wisely providing for her offspring, knew in her wisdom how to make arrangements in advance, which were to be to their advantage. Accordingly the king found what the lady said acceptable, and when the oath had been taken, the lady found the will of the king acceptable, and so, thanks be to God, Emma noblest of women, became the wife of the very mighty King Knutr. (33)

Emma goes so far as to incite Cnut to give her what she requires by bringing up the fact that Cnut has had children by another wife. She compels him to promise that only *her* sons by him would be legitimately eligible to succeed the throne. Emma cleverly refuses the marriage,

keeping Cnut from his ultimate goal, until she is given her promise. With the safety of her sons' futures and legitimacy established, Emma marries Cnut and becomes queen of England, again.

In addition to Judith and Queen Emma, Wealþeow again lends herself as an example of fulfilling a powerful woman's role. Though more commonly identified as a peace-weaver, Michael Murphy suggests that the queen of the Danes functions as an inciter in active speeches in Hrothgar's hall: "It would be extending the facts too far to say that in her first appearance she functions as a 'taunter', but it is noticeable that only after she has spoken publicly to Beowulf and he has vowed to her publicly is the hero certain of his acceptance as a functionary of the Danes" (111). Only after Wealþeow offers the hall goblet to the warriors and Beowulf himself does he promise her he will fulfill his vow, to triumph in future battles and to keep the safety of her sons. Wealþeow shows her dignity and influence by the "strong-willed, forceful women of the sagas," (Murphy 111), in her dutiful expression of negotiation and encouragement of Beowulf.

Wealþeow may have been a better example of an inciter than a peace-weaver, but the woman in *The Wife's Lament* may be interpreted as a failure in both positions. Similar to viewing the speaker as a failed peace-weaver in her sorrow, it is possible that she may be viewed as a woman who has failed in negotiation. Though the inciter role was not occupied by *all* women in Anglo-Saxon society, those who were already in positions of considerable agency (such as the aristocracy) had more opportunities to engage in such an action. Furthermore, the speaker's lamentation and fear for her future may indicate that she may have had no opportunity for inciting, or that she approached it incorrectly. Furthermore, she could possibly have offended her husband's family, "that man's kinsmen" (11), with her inciting, and kin within Anglo-Saxon society would have had more power as a family unit than would an individual wife.

The woman in *The Wife's Lament* may not have had opportunity to incite her husband because he may have already been intending to go to battle. If his mind had been already made up in this way, it may be argued that her husband did not need her to goad him into building courage. Perhaps he had no choice, and has left "filled with grief / concealing his mind, plotting murder / with a smiling face," (19-21). This murder may be interpreted as not the death of his wife, which she seems to think he supported, but the murder of those he is soon to fight. The wife's "exile" may be more of a mental state than literal; she may feel exiled because she has lost someone she holds close to her and fears she will never see him again.

If we view the wife as an inciter, in that she attempted to incite her husband and fill him with encouragement and hope, her narrative suggests she has failed. Though scholars do not have the "background story" leading up to the situation contained in *The Wife's Lament*, we do have examples of women who have positively practiced the negotiating action with a degree of success. Judith's incitement of the Israelites to fight the Assyrians shows a woman utilizing powerful speech to bring forth action, undeniable victory for the Israelites and celebration of their lady Judith (Estes 348). The wife in the poem laments "My beloved will suffer / the cares of a sorrowful mind; he will remember / too often a happier home. Woe to the one / who must suffer longing for a loved one," (50-53). He may be captured by those enemy forces he has faced, and his wife predicts this "let him be outlawed / in a far distant land, so that my friend sits / under stone cliffs chilled by storms, / weary-minded, surrounded by water / in a sad dreary hall!" (46-50). I interpret this phrase to suggest that the wife is blaming herself for her husband's leaving, perhaps without proper battle-preparation, and essentially for his death.

Finally, we may be able to read the speaker's situation as one where, though she may have exchanged encouraging words and support with her husband, "so often we swore / that only

death could ever divide us, / nothing else—all that has changed now;" (21-23), they may not have stayed with him. Her husband's kin could very well have disliked this woman when she married into the family, for whatever reason it may have been. Their disapproval of her could have caused them to "think / in secret that they would separate us," (11-12) so she could no longer communicate positively with her husband. These scheming kinsmen could also have been interested in gaining the man's property and estate upon his death, and therefore would have desired his death in battle. The wife's incitement may have slightly diminished this possibility, so her exile could have been due to the fact that her husband's kin, not him directly, banished her. This may be a stretch in interpretation, but at the same time, considering the responsibilities of inciters, it could also be a viable explanation.

Woman as Wife or Concubine

It may be noted that until the Norman Invasion of 1066, women did enjoy a similarly equal status with their male counterparts (Fell 7). "A division of labor operated...between spouses, the wife being particularly concerned with the running of the household and possibly some gardening and livestock raising, while the husband was concerned with ploughing and similar heavy labor or supporting his lord's undertakings," (Lancaster 244-245). Sex and marital relationships often appeared in conjunction, at least that was the intent in order to promote the society's population. Anglo-Saxon marriage was a common institution, uniting families through peace-weaving or for financial purposes. "Literature and law alike suggest that the woman's role within marriage in Anglo-Saxon England had, at any rate for the free-born, immense potential," (Fell 71). Additionally, throughout the Anglo-Saxon period, law-codes created by various kings, including those of Æðelbert, Edmund, and Cnut, have shown society's attitudes toward women and their rights, especially in the protection and value of women with children and widows.

Marriage relationships had existed before Christianity's influence took hold and were interestingly different than what one might expect. In particular, the *morgengifu,* which literally meant 'morning-gift,' was a provision that a prospective husband would pay, not to a bride's kin, but to the bride *herself* (Fell 56). In the laws of Edmund, this "bride-gift" is called "what he will grant her in case she choose his will," (Buckstaff 242) meaning what a bridegroom will pay to a bride if he is lucky enough to be accepted. This *morgengifu* or "bride-gift" has at times been considered as a provision of property or worth for the wife if her husband would happen to die.

Marriage laws exist throughout Anglo-Saxon history, and many have established clear rights for female individuals. The laws of Æðelbert King of Kent, 560-616 AD, assert that a woman could leave a marriage if she found herself unhappy, "If she wish to go away with her children, let her have half the property" (Law 80). This supports the argument that women were in charge of their own actions within a marriage, and could legally "opt out" if they so desired. To protect a woman from being wrongly associated with a crime that her husband has committed, Cnut II, 76 states:

> If a man bring stolen things home to his cot, it is right that he (the owner) have what he went after. And if it was not brought under the wife's custody, she shall be innocent. But she shall guard the keys, that is, of her storeroom and her chest and her press. If it is brought into one of these places then is she guilty," (Buckstaff 48).

This law both directly protects a woman from being dragged into a crime that she did not commit, and also points out the wife's power and responsibility for the different storage areas within the home. This type of legal protection provides further evidence that women were considered valued and necessary to the Anglo-Saxons, for they were responsible for things which

men were not, and essentially functioned as guardians of the hearth and home. The symbiotic relationship between husbands and wives, working alongside one another and fulfilling the duties that the other could not, supports the notion that there was a sense of mutual affection within an Anglo-Saxon marriage.

If husbands and wives considered each other to be their "other half" in work and life, the woman in *The Wife's Lament* may have been exiled due to forces beyond her immediate control. R.F. Leslie examines the situation of the poem's speaker, discussing the fact that the woman may have misinterpreted her husband's "smiling face...plotting murder" (21, 20) as plotting to murder her. Rather than realizing the more obvious and probable reason for her permanent banishment, at the hands of her husband's kin after he has gone away, she focuses on him, probably because of the heartbreak she is enduring due to feeling so betrayed. Leslie explains this sorrowful confusion: "The *morþor* which she had discovered him to be meditating must have been directed against someone else, and it furnishes one explanation for his departure abroad. We are told further that he cloaked his intentions under a cheerful demeanor (21); such behaviour can be explained by a desire to avoid giving his wife any uneasiness, for he would know that ignorance of his proposed crime would be necessary to her if she were to be spared of the consequences of it; a wife could suffer, because of fore-knowledge of the commission of a crime, the same penalty as her husband would incur," (6). In all actuality, the husband, by withholding his intentions from his wife, is actually trying to protect her, but she fails to understand this intent because of her fear, both of his departure and his kin, with which she is left behind.

Christine Fell's discussion of the Anglo-Saxon term *freond* and its suggestion of positive relationships is the obvious connection to the speaker's description of her own *freond* within *The*

Wife's Lament. The wife describes the promise that she and her *freond* have made: "*Ful oft wit gebeotedan/ þæt unc ne gedælde nemne deaþ ana/ owiht elles*…Often the two of us vowed that nothing should divide us, except for death only, nothing else" (69). This vow would have been the marriage vow or an agreement that the wife had made with her husband at their union, an emotional bond in addition to their property agreement. Later when the wife mentions that "there are friends on earth, / lovers living who lie in their bed," (33-34), longing is evoked for her want of the same situation. Instead, the speaker may only recall her former happy days in marriage, because her husband's bond with his kin has seemed to outweigh the bond with his wife.

If she were indeed involved in a marriage relationship, the wife's decision to resist hatred and contempt toward her husband indicates that though she has been severely wronged, she has the loyalty and the decency to, in a sense, forgive. Since marriage was not commonly arranged, unless for peace-weaving or land inheritance, there may have been mutual affection or appreciation between husbands and wives. While married, wives were expected to work side-by-side with their husbands, sharing in both their joys and sorrows. The disconnection of *Wife's* speaker from her partner would have prevented her from ever experiencing emotion with him again. In her forgiveness, she is attempting to share in his emotions one last time. However, now she is asking that *he* may feel the sorrow that *she* is experiencing, just as she lived and shared in her husband's sentiments during their marriage together. Though she may not understand why she has been placed in exile, she is using spoken *action* to express her emotions and opinion.

Contrary to the vast amount of examinations pertaining to Anglo-Saxon marriage, our knowledge of Anglo-Saxon sexuality is blurred, simply because there are few texts or other evidence in existence which refers distinctly to the topic. In addition to the lack of textual references, Hugh Magenni's essay, "No Sex Please, We're Anglo-Saxons: Attitudes to Sexuality

in Old English Prose and Poetry" argues that most texts were molded by "a monastic culture which emphatically was worried about sexual morality" (2, 20-21). However, I would disagree with viewing *The Wife's Lament* with this type of approach, because of the desire expressed by the speaker, and because of the complicated dynamic of Anglo-Saxon England's converted pagan population, who did not necessarily whole-heartedly embrace Christian morals. Sexual desire could very much have been a reason for the speaker in *The Wife's Lament* have such sorrow, especially if she turned out to be an exiled concubine.

The concubine has often been assumed to be more closely associated with the sexual relationship between men and women, to have been subtly acknowledged but never socially accepted. Contrary to this misconception, concubines were actually quite common. They existed most extensively among the upper classes where socio-political status allowed men to have freedom and access to the sexual services of women. According to Pauline Stafford, marriage and concubinage were distinct:

> Marriage as distinct from sex is always a social affair, concerned with the production of future generations, ensuring the survival of society and of its existing property structure, hedged with the support of society's laws...Concubinage, on the other hand, is a sexual relationship, usually of long—even lifelong—duration, but lacking legal protection for the woman and her children, and easily terminated. Concubinage was a private affair between the parties concerned, accompanied by little or nothing in the way of ceremony (63).

Polygyny among upper group males might have included one wife and several concubines, or simply one legal wife and one concubine. Women who fulfilled the latter role could also have been referred to as "secondary wives," being publicly acknowledged by the community, but not by any legal means.

As discussed earlier, there has been popular scholarship on reading instances pertaining Anglo-Saxon sexuality from a Christian viewpoint, but I would choose to read *The Wife's Lament* as a poem primarily uninfluenced by Christianity. Though the Christianization of Anglo-Saxon England began around 597 AD, influenced both by Roman and Celtic Christianity, many pagans continued to practice their former rituals while wearing a Christian façade. It may be noted that the "momentum of conversion wavered back and forth for a century or so, with large areas of resistance and a good deal of back-sliding" (Liuzza, "The Medieval Period" xxxiii). Though written between 960 and 990, *The Wife's Lament* may have been a tale that had existed within a pagan society, and the themes of kinship, peace-weaving and lamentation support this notion.

Before the Church and Christianity saturated Anglo-Saxon England completely, concubinage was simply accepted as a part of society. Today, contemporary readers may interpret the role of concubine being one of shame or degradation. Additionally, their exclusion from the legal domain might suggest that they were not valued or given any social rights. As Margaret Clunies Ross notes, "the fact that concubinage exists outside the framework of the law does *not* imply that the concubine's position is necessarily a dishonourable one" (6). Concubines were considered members of a man's household, and as Clunies Ross continues to point out, she and her children were given "traditionally determined privileges" and were able to inherit property and assets from their father if he chose to recognize the relationship (6). Furthermore, she notes that the Anglo-Saxons shared a common pattern of marriage with other Germanic peoples, in that a man would have one fully legal wife, with whom he had been betrothed, but he was also allowed to take other women to add to his household as concubines. These relationships would be publicly recognized, but not the same as the marriage that was accompanied by formal

ceremony and "the exchange of sureties" (14). Wives had legal security, and concubines did, and the differences essentially stopped there. This information supports the notion that wives and concubines, socially speaking, shared very similar roles within a household.

Depending on the date of documents and materials being examined, there is considerable variation in social attitudes towards concubines, their acceptability fading as the Anglo-Saxon society is further Christianized. With the knowledge that concubinage was practiced and acceptably acknowledged as a feature of Germanic and parts of Anglo-Saxon society, the "wife" in *The Wife's Lament* may not be a wife at all; perhaps this woman was the concubine of the poem's lord, and her exile came has a consequence of their (now) illicit relationship. Though wives and concubines seemed to fulfill similar purposes within a household, wives enjoyed more legal support than concubines, which would only increase when Christian-influenced laws began to appear. It is possible that the man's kin in the poem may have recently converted, and therefore would have disapproved of the speaker. They may have "forced me to live in a forest grove, / under an oak tree in an earthen cave," (27-28) in order to eliminate her from the household that she recently occupied. She is "a friendless exile," (l.10) who, because of the household's changed attitude towards her, has lost her prior position and relationship with her lover. Where formerly she and the "young man" had an intimate bond, "our friendship" (25), now she must "endure the hatred of my dearest one" (26). Her sense of loss is immensely tragic, and unfortunately seems irreversible.

Furthermore, perhaps her lover has also converted, and is shameful of his actions, banishing her both to absolve himself of her presence and punish her for her deeds. Lorraine Lancaster points out Cnut's Law 54.1: "And if anyone has a lawful wife and also a concubine, no priest is to do for him any of the offices which must be done for a Christian man, until he desists

and atones for it as deeply as the bishop directs him, and desists from such for ever" (Lancaster, 246). Though Cnut's laws were written fairly late in the Anglo-Saxon period, after *The Wife's Lament*, this particular law describes the degree of seriousness that the Christian church held toward the "sin" of cavorting with concubines or "adulteresses." The speaker's husband may have recalled such rigidity in his newly adopted religion, and feared the judgment of God if he had continued his relationship. The woman herself is sorrowful at his rejection, being placed in the "earthen cave / ...here my lord's leaving / often fiercely seized me" (32-33). Concubinage may have been practiced long after the widespread practice of Christianity had been established, but its prominence was declining. Any agency the woman may have been able to acquire as a socially acknowledged concubine would eventually become lost.

It seems that, with the research and discussion available concerning wives and concubines, the two positions shared very similar social roles. Married women enjoyed the comfort of legal protection and security, in that they and their children would have had direct opportunity to inherit when the husband died. Concubines did not share in this legal security automatically; the only way that concubines and their children's welfare could be secured after a man's death was if he *chose* to recognize the relationship. Although the legality of both of these unions differed greatly, both female roles existed to function within the household as mothers and bedfellows, working alongside the man of the household as well as each other. They fulfilled their roles in order to promote the bettering of the line, as well as the society. For all intensive purposes, wives and concubines share the same responsibilities.

Conclusion

As the different historical and literary examples have shown, women had ample opportunity to assert power and agency within the secular Anglo-Saxon society. Women fulfilled

specific social roles that were both expected of them by society and by themselves as individuals. Whatever the situation in *The Wife's Lament* may have been, we will never know for certain. I have determined that it matters not what interpretation one decides to approach when considering *The Wife's Lament*. One may consider that the speaker, though she proved to be a counter-example of several of the roles examined here, is actually an effective example of how women were able to assert themselves in these roles and were necessary to the society. The failure of the speaker emphasizes what was expected of and possible for women in Anglo-Saxon England to accomplish, that peace-weaving, inciting, and roles in relationships needed to occur because the rest of the society relied upon them. The fact that the speaker did not fulfill her role, whatever it may have been, may explain her exile. The symbiotic relationships between Anglo-Saxon men and women illustrate how the society valued both sexes for their individual roles. It also indicates that if one failed at said role, it threatened societal harmony and efficiency.

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