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8-23-2017

The Wife's Lament

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STARS Citation

Beck, Christian, "The Wife's Lament" (2017). *Faculty Scholarship and Creative Works*. 122.
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/ucfscholar/122>

The Wife's Lament

Translation by Dr. Christian Beck

I make this song of myself, full of sorrow,
about my fate[1]. I can surely tell
what hardships I endured, since I have grown up,
new and old, never more than now.

5 I must ever suffer my misery of exile.
First my lord[2] left his people
over the waves; at dawn I worry
in what land my lord may be.
I departed on a journey, a friendless exile,

10 to find a place for my grievous need,
my lord's kinsmen began to consider
in secret that they would separate us,
so that we, far apart in the world-realm
lived most wretchedly, and me in languish.

15 My lord commanded me to take up dwelling here.[3]
In this place, I had little valued,
honored friends; for that is my great misery.
Then I found my lord was like myself—
unfortunate, full of sorrow,

20 concealing violence, plotting murder—
with joyous demeanor we often vowed
that only death could part us,
nothing else. All that is changed;
it has come to pass as though our love

25 had never been. I must, far and near,
suffer the deadly-feud of my much-beloved.[4]
I was ordered to live in a wooded grove
under an oak tree in an earth-cave. [5]
Old is this earth-hall; I am seized with longing.

30 The dales are dark, the hills high,
harsh hedges[6] overgrown with briars,
a joyless home. Here my lord's departure
brutally lays hold of me. There are friends on earth,

lovers living together, lying in bed,
 35 while I depart alone through the earth-cave,
 under the oak tree at the break of day.
 There I may sit the summer-long day;
 There I may weep for my many difficult
 journeys of exile, for then I may never
 40 find comfort for that heart felt sorrow,
 nor all that longing that I have in this life.
 If a young man must be sad-hearted,
 harsh heart-thoughts, let him have
 a happy demeanor with that breast-care (i.e., heartache),
 45 a multitude of everlasting sorrows[7]. Whether he is dependent on himself
 for all his world's joy, or he is banished
 far from his homeland, my friend sits
 under a stony, frost-covered cliff.
 A downcast lord surrounded by water
 50 in a dreary-hall, my lord endures
 great sorrow of the mind; he remembers too often
 a more joyous dwelling-place. Woe to him
 who languishes awaiting a loved one.

Annotations

1. In the Old English (OE), the feminine constructions of *geomorre* and *sið* clearly indicate that the speaker is female.
2. The word used here is *hlaford*, which means “lord” or “liege-lord”. Due to the cultural views on marriage at the time (and this one in particular), this can also mean “husband.” The language of marriage in this instance is the same as that of a *thane* (“warrior” or “king follower”) and his lord.
3. This is one of the most contested lines in the poem. The phrase *herheard niman* can refer to “keep a house in a grove” or to “live in a [pagan] shrine.” I chose a more mundane and less interpretively ambiguous translation because we do not know what it would mean to “take up residence in a pagan shrine.” There is just not enough cultural context and historical understanding to definitively state what this practice would mean for the Anglo-Saxons.
4. This sentence is rather ambiguous. The OE reads: *Sceal ic feor ge neah / mines felaleofan fæhðe dreogan*. This could be interpreted as suffering from the malice of her husband, or suffering from a feud that the husband started. Either way, the wife is suffering from the actions/emotions of her husband.
5. This could also be an “earthen grave.”
6. The *bitre burgtunas* or “harsh hedges” are referring figuratively to the *duna uphea*, “high hills.”

7. I translated this as a gnomic: an aphorism expressing a universal truth. The sentence's grammar begins in the subjunctive, but then shifts to the indicative. This is common in OE poetry where gnomic statements are used. Given the time period, the masculine "man" is used as the universal, not the more inclusive "person/one." Therefore, she could be referring to herself within the context of a larger truth that she has internalized. Alternatively, as the next sentence suggests, she could also be referring to her husband in a distant land.

Source:

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