
Looking Into Enclosure in the Old English Female Lyrics

The only two poems in Old English to feature a first-person female speaker are known by the titles “Wulf and Eadwacer” and “The Wife’s Lament.”¹ These “female” elegies exhibit the cultural and physical restrictions on religious women discussed in my introduction. Although they are usually linked to poems that appear deeply inflected by Christianity, such as “The Wanderer” or “The Seafarer,” the female elegies have traditionally not been seen to exhibit the cultural influences of the Christian church. In fact, these poems fit more neatly into the culture of female monasticism than has been realized in previous scholarship. The elegies illustrate the tension between the silenced and enclosed female religious of Anglo-Saxon England, and an active feminine speaking subject that a character like Wealhtheow in *Beowulf* can only suggest. The speakers of “The Wife’s Lament” and “Wulf and Eadwacer” offer the possibility of a female voice, but they are nevertheless firmly constrained within social and spatial boundaries. They move figuratively, if not literally, beyond enclosure, to write a space for themselves as subjects, to create texts, even though (or because) each is unable to move beyond the earth-cave and the fen-surrounded island that she inhabits involuntarily.

Much of the critical discussion about these poems has centered on the question of gender, since several critics (one as recently as 1987) have found it unlikely that an Old English poem would feature a female persona. They have thus explained away the grammatical forms that gender these speakers, usually citing scribal error.² In general, however, critics agree that these speakers are women. Beyond that, the poems are frustratingly enigmatic. Both speakers

share a longing for past pleasures, paired with a lament for present misery. Both are physically confined. Unlike those elegies known to have male speakers, such as "The Wanderer" or "The Seafarer," the female elegies do not pair earthly sorrow with the future hope of Christian (or spiritual) consolation; rather, as one critic has recently written about "The Wife's Lament," each speaker "seems irrevocably trapped in her present."³ And unlike the speakers in the male elegies, the female speakers do not attempt to deny or surmount the pleasures and pains of the body in the material world; rather, their mental journeys are strictly focused on their physical circumstances, past and present.

Unable to go wandering or seafaring, the female speakers of the elegies instead use another form of creative power: they "weave" their own stories into texts. They loosen (but do not shed) the bonds of enclosure, as they signify beyond conventionally gendered borders. Because their physical containment restricts action but not speech or thought, their journeys turn inward, insisting upon (and thereby linking) the physical and the personal. They thereby anticipate devotional literature written for enclosed female religious of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, which, as Elizabeth Robertson has shown, developed a feminine spirituality grounded in the body. This devotional tradition, comprising works such as *Ancrene Wisse*, *Hali Meidhad*, and *Sawles Warde*, builds upon the popular medieval (mis)conception of the Aristotelian view that saw woman as flawed or imperfect man. Intended for female readers (though written by male authors), this literary tradition linked the categories of woman and body: "From a medieval perspective, therefore," Robertson writes, "a woman's spiritual nature was defined by her inescapable corporeality."⁴

The female elegies themselves are grammatically gendered feminine. Yet just as significantly, an "inescapable corporeality" similarly distinguishes each text. Moreover, within each poem the cultural manifestations of female enclosure in Anglo-Saxon England produce a discourse of enclosure which in turn produces and *genders* each speaker. We can understand the "self" or "subject" of these elegies as the individual identity produced through a given set of linguistic, discursive, and gendered properties or behaviors. The subject speaks or otherwise enacts these "attributes"—or more precisely, is enacted by them.⁵ The elegies are powerful examples of the cultural construc-

tion of gender in Old English texts, made all the more powerful because they are anonymous.⁶ Analyzing the operations of the discourse of enclosure in the elegies will help to clarify the means by which those feminine subjects emerge within the poems.

Judith Butler's formulation of gender performance is particularly useful for the analysis of the feminine subjects of these anonymous elegies, because it permits us to bypass questions of authority and authorship and to examine instead the ways in which the repeated "acts" of gender in the poems produce their feminine speaking subjects. Butler argues that gender is not a stable or fixed category, but is instead a repeated set of culturally and socially established acts, and this repetition constitutes the appearance of a stable gendered self. She writes: "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (*Gender Trouble*, 25). The seemingly stable gender identities of the female elegiac speakers are, I suggest, likewise the products of culturally established "expressions" of gender mandated by the terms of female religious enclosure.

As we have seen, the discourse of enclosure marks the female body as both an object to be enclosed and itself an enclosure, both prohibited from movement and impenetrable. Of all the Old English elegies, only the two female elegies exhibit these restrictions against their speakers; the male elegiac speakers, in contrast, are defined by their free, unfettered physical movement (even though they are exiled).⁷ The Wanderer, in the elegy of that name, walks the paths of exile, and like the *hlaforð* in "The Wife's Lament," or like Wulf, the Wanderer's body is not enclosed; though exiled, he is not imprisoned. Thus although we might reasonably argue that the Wanderer endures a kind of spiritual or metaphysical "imprisonment" by being exiled, he is not physically contained. In a poem such as "Deor," in which a man *is* fettered (Weland the smith), readers can be reassured of metaphysical, if not actual release, voiced in the refrain, "þæs ofereode, þisses swa mæg." In the same poem, however, Beaduhild's physical condition, pregnancy, is inescapable; she cannot expect the same kind of physical release from the ties that bind her that Weland can.

The concept of enclosure in the male elegies is therefore antithetical to enclosure in the female elegies. In vivid contrast to the female speakers, who let their imaginations wander since their bodies

cannot, the speaker in “The Wanderer” wishes rather to enclose or imprison his “traitorous” mind, to fetter his thoughts, which dwell too often on his earthly misery:⁸

. . . ic to soðe wat
 þæt bið in eorle indryhten þeaw
 þæt he his ferð-locan fæste binde
 healde his hord-cofan hycge swa he wylle (11b–14).

[I know truly that it is a noble custom in a man to bind fast his ‘soul-enclosure,’ protect his heart, whatever he may think.]

Though the speaker of “The Wanderer” may appear to be expressing a non-gender-specific desire, the cultural convention he refers to here is in fact gendered masculine. In the “male” elegies, that is, though the speakers obviously lament their past and present circumstances, they also display the belief that such lamenting is inappropriate, and they attempt to silence themselves, to reject a focus on worldly suffering. As Robert E. Bjork has shown, the Wanderer restricts his own self-expression because his culture mandates such restraint.⁹ What Bjork calls “the imagery of silence,” in which the Wanderer specifically wishes to bind up his thoughts, is likewise echoed in the Old English *Maxims*: “Thought must be held in, hand controlled, the pupil must be in the eye, wisdom in the breast, where the thoughts of a man are.”¹⁰ This insistence on “tightlipped stoicism” is a cultural imperative that not only constrains the Wanderer, but that also reassures him: all customs, conventions, and boundaries—whether social, cultural, or material—remain comfortably in place (Bjork, 122).

In “The Seafarer,” too, the speaker wishes to control his errant thoughts, but not before they have roamed widely over the seas, not unlike the speaker himself. As John C. Pope has argued, what begins as a literal voyage for the Seafarer leads him to contemplate a spiritual or allegorical voyage, as his soul “leaves” his body and “roams widely,” returning to urge the body onwards:¹¹

Forþon nu min hyge hweorfeð ofer hreþerlocan,
 min modsefa mid mereflode

ofer hwæles eþel hweorfeð wide,
 eorþan sceatas, cymeð eft to me
 gifre ond grædig, gielleð anfloga,
 hweteð on hwælweg hreþer unwearnum
 ofer holma gelagu (58–64a).

[Therefore now my mind roams over my breast-enclosure, my spirit roams widely with the sea, over the whale's home, over the earth's surfaces, and comes again to me, ravenous and greedy, the lone-flier yells, urges the heart on the whale-way irresistibly, over the lake of the waters.]

Yet the transformation that occurs (apparently allegorically) over the course of "The Seafarer" ensures considerable movement for the speaker, since even the spiritual journey he longs for will mean a release of both body and spirit. As Rosemary Woolf explains, "[i]t is from the dead life, transient on land, that the Seafarer wishes to escape by embarking on his sea-voyage."¹²

For the Seafarer, the thoughts of the heart do not have to be locked away, but rather redirected. Once he elects this allegorical voyage, the elegy moves into its turn of Christian consolation, and he regains control of those wandering thoughts:

Stieran mon sceal strongum mode, ond þæt on stapelum
 healdan,
 ond gewis werum, wisum clæne (109–110)

[A man must control {his} strong spirit, and hold it within bounds, and {must} be prudent with men and pure in {his} ways.]¹³

Even here, with this appeal to stability, there is forward movement as the speaker recognizes that although his thoughts might not be successfully repressed, they can be controlled and propelled in a desirable direction.

Like the Wanderer, then, the Seafarer directs his thoughts away from worldly discomforts, towards a metaphysical or spiritual release.¹⁴ At the end of "The Seafarer," the speaker's language is still deeply focused on movement:

Uton we hycgan hwær we ham agen,
 ond þonne geþencan hu we þider cumen (117–118)

[Let us think where we may have a home, and then think
 how we might go there.]

Both male speakers embrace the traditionally gendered hierarchies of early Christian thought: they reject the physical (the feminine) in favor of the spiritual (the masculine).¹⁵ The Wanderer, to be sure, laments the loss of physical treasures and comforts, but he emphasizes their transience, and that poem ends, like “The Seafarer,” with the speaker repressing his anxious, material thoughts and turning his attention to a more spiritual plane. The elegies do not provide this option to the female speakers. But while female physical enclosure prohibits action, it permits speech; the desires of the female speakers turn inward as they expose and explore memories of their physical lives that the Wanderer would have locked away. And, just as they lack the consolatory turn seen in the male elegies, the female elegies willingly express both emotion and physical discomfort. The narrative emphasis on physical enclosure, paired with such “interiority,” genders the speakers of “Wulf and Eadwacer” and “The Wife’s Lament” feminine.¹⁶ While my analysis of these poems will not attempt to prove female authorship, or even a precise monastic provenance, it will offer a new context for reading them. The social, cultural, and material conditions of early medieval female monasticism can clarify many of the lexical, rhetorical, and cultural ambiguities of the female elegies. Above all, we shall see that reading the elegies within a monastic context situates these speakers within the literary and social history of Anglo-Saxon women.

MONASTIC TEXTUALITY AND THE FEMALE VOICE

Textual evidence from the early Middle Ages, specifically the extant writings of Anglo-Saxon nuns, can inform our understanding of the two Old English female elegies. Scholars have recently demonstrated the relatively high levels of literacy among Anglo-Saxon religious women and among their counterparts on the continent.¹⁷ This literacy is evidenced primarily by Latin letters written to and by the nuns. Yet even this “textual travel” was eventually restricted. As Peter

Dronke has shown, a capitulary issued by Charlemagne in 789 prohibited not just the nuns' movement outside the cloister, but even their communication. As cited by Dronke, the capitulary reads, in part:

[N]o abbess should presume to leave her convent without our permission, nor allow those under her to do so . . . and on no account let them dare to write *winileodas*, or send them from the convent.¹⁸

Unfortunately, no *winileodas*, or "songs for a friend," survive, and so we cannot gain a precise picture of the kinds of texts the nuns were prohibited from composing and sending to their "friends."

Dronke, however, argues that "Wulf and Eadwacer" may provide a glimpse of the genre, and he links the two female elegies to extant Latin letters by Anglo-Saxon nuns, suggesting that the female elegies and the nuns' letters may derive from analogous (if not identical) personal, social, or material circumstances.¹⁹ Like the nuns' letters, the Old English female elegies may suggest evidence of female literary practices and traditions; certainly the thematic similarities are profound. He translates a letter from the nun Berthgyth written to her brother, perhaps in the 770s:

Why is it, my brother,
 that you have let pass so long a time,
 that you have delayed to come?
 Why do you not want to remember
 that I am alone upon this earth,
 and no other brother will visit me,
 or any kinsman come to me? . . .
 Oh brother, oh my brother,
 how can you afflict the mind of me, who am naught,
 with constant grief, weeping and sorrow,
 day and night, through the absence of your love?²⁰

Dronke argues that "the language comes close to that of the . . . [*winileodas*] . . . The evocation of solitude and tears and longing has precise parallels in the two extant Anglo-Saxon women's love-aments . . . in the naked emotions expressed, though not of course

in the poems' narrative situations."²¹ Dronke's sensitive comparisons between Berthgyth's letters and "Wulf and Eadwacer," however, are unnecessarily undercut by his last point, since we simply cannot know the "narrative situations" of the Old English poems.

We do know, however, that the locus of women's literary activity in early medieval England was the convent. Numerous examples of this "feminine textuality"—the copying of books, the composing of Latin verse, the studying of Scripture—can be found throughout the letters known as the Boniface correspondence.²² That the Old English female elegies may have been produced for or within such a community of female scholars is no doubt unverifiable, but must remain a strong likelihood.²³

The women whose letters are preserved in the Boniface correspondence were nuns who sometimes lived as missionaries among hostile strangers, and who typically were cut off from friends or surrounded by only a small community. The nun Egburg, writing to Boniface (ca. 716–718), occupies an isolated position strikingly similar to that of the two Old English female speakers. She focuses her letter on her physical or worldly unhappiness. She regrets the departure of her sister, Wethburg, who has left for Rome to become a *reclusa*, or anchorite. Egburg contrasts her sister's more happy enclosure with her own undesired position: "Illa arduam et arctam iam greditur callem; ego autem adhuc in infimis lege carnali ceu quadam compede prepedita iaceo" ("She treads the hard and narrow way, while I lie here below, bound by the law of the flesh as it were in shackles").²⁴ Her words evoke the double bond of female claustration: within her physical or spatial isolation, she is likewise bound by *lege carnali*, "the law of the flesh," her own body. Her expressions anticipate the admonitions to anchoresses that we see in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, warning against the dangers of the world outside the cell; Egburg, though she knows it is improper, misses the comforts and companions of *this* world. We shall see that the female lyrics likewise evoke this articulation of worldly longing, and the suffocating frustration of bodily and spatial enclosure expressed in the correspondence of the unhappy nun.

The Boniface correspondence also includes letters illustrating the increasingly insistent demand for strict female enclosure. As Stephanie Hollis has shown, a number of Boniface's female correspondents desired to travel to Rome on pilgrimage, and Boniface

was not altogether opposed to the prospect of female journeying—the journey, after all, led them to a more spiritual and contemplative life.²⁵ Some, like Wethburg, traveled to Rome only to be enclosed there as anchorites.²⁶ The correspondence as a whole contains numerous examples of female pilgrimage, and of both male and female monastics alike choosing pilgrimage as the avenue towards a greater *stabilitas*. Gillian Overing and Clare Lees have recently suggested that a common theme of loneliness or “alienation of women from kin” links the women’s letters of the Boniface correspondence: “It is hard to escape the conclusion that women, exiled from their kin for whatever reasons, seek the solace of real exile and the life of the ascetic, or *peregrinus*.”²⁷ Yet I would argue that the women also seek permanence and stability, just as Boniface urges. Female pilgrimage in these examples is a temporary condition leading to the greater *stabilitas* to be found in some actual or symbolic enclosure, whether anchorhold or kinship structure.

Boniface is modestly ambivalent about his capacity to advise another of his correspondents, Bugge, about the suitability of her own proposed pilgrimage to Rome. He writes:

Notum sit tibi, soror carissima, de illo consilio, quo me indignum per litteras interrogasti, quod ego tibi iter peregrinum nec interdicere per me nec audenter suadere presumo.

[I desire you to know, dearest sister, that in the matter about which you wrote asking advice of me, unworthy though I am, I dare neither forbid your pilgrimage on my own responsibility nor rashly persuade you to it.]²⁸

Yet the purpose of pilgrimage for Bugge, according to Boniface, must always be the desire for greater *stabilitas*, for separation from worldly matters in favor of the contemplative life. Boniface goes on to advise Bugge:

Si enim sollicitudinem, quam erga servos Dei et ancillas et monasterialem vitam habuisti propter acquirendam quietem et contemplationem Dei dimisisti, quomodo debes nunc secularium hominum verbis et voluntatibus servire cum labore et tediosa sollicitudine? Melius enim mihi videtur, si

propter seculares in patria libertatem quietem mentis habere nullatenus possis, ut per peregrinationem libertatem contemplationis, si volueris et possis, adquiras; quemadmodum soror nostra Uuiethburga faciebat. Quae mihi per suas litteras intimavit, quod talem vitam quietem invenisset iuxta limina sancti Petri, qualem longum tempus desiderando quaesivit.

[If, for the sake of rest and divine contemplation, you have laid aside the care for the servants and maids of God and for the monastic life which you once had, how could you now subject yourself with labor and wearing anxiety to the words and wishes of men of this world? It would seem to me better, if you can in no wise have freedom and a quiet mind at home on account of worldly men, that you should obtain freedom of contemplation by means of a pilgrimage, if you so desire and are able, as our sister Wiethburga [*sic*] did. She has written to me that she has found at the shrine of St. Peter the kind of quiet life which she had long sought in vain.]²⁹

Wethburg's pilgrimage to Rome was merely a means to an end—not, perhaps, unlike the journey of the speaker described in "The Wife's Lament." Clearly the pilgrimage's most important results for the Anglo-Saxon nuns were the freedom from earthly concerns and the possibility of an inwardly focused contemplative life.

Later, Boniface's ambivalence about the desirability of female pilgrimage is resolved. In a letter to Archbishop Cuthbert of Canterbury, he writes:

. . . bonum esset et honestas et pudicitia vestrae ecclesiae et aliquod velamentum turpitudinis, si prohiberet synodus et principes vestri mulieribus et velatis feminis illud iter et frequentiam, quam ad Romanam civitatem veniendo et redeundo faciunt, quia magna ex parte pereunt paucis remanentibus integris. Perpaucis enim sunt civitates in Longobardia vel in Francia aut in Gallia, in qua non sit adultera vel meretrix generis Anglorum. Quod scandalum est et turpitudinis totius aecclisae vestrae.

[. . . it would be well and favorable for the honor and purity of your church, and provide a certain shield against vice, if your synod and your princes would forbid matrons and veiled women to make these frequent journeys back and forth to Rome. A great part of them perish and few keep their virtue. There are very few towns in Lombardy or Frankland or Gaul where there is not a courtesan or a harlot of English stock. It is a scandal and disgrace to your whole church.]³⁰

As Hollis has aptly commented on this passage, “Boniface’s apprehension of rampant female sexuality at large and needing to be brought under control heralds a legislative movement towards the enclosure of monastic women on the continent.”³¹ One crucial difference between the type of pilgrimage Boniface describes here and that described in the letters from Egburg and to Bugge is his emphasis on the nature of the women’s journeys. The pilgrimages described in the earlier letters had, as their goal, the eventual enclosure of the female traveller. In his letter to Archbishop Cuthbert, however, Boniface specifically complains of the frequency of female pilgrimage, which does not result in the containment of the pilgrims, but which results instead, apparently, in the “dangerous” spread of English female sexuality along the pilgrimage route.

The seriousness of transgressing the rules of enclosure is documented in a letter from Lull excommunicating the abbess Switha for allowing two of the nuns in her charge to leave the enclosure.³² As Christine Fell has suggested, Switha’s fault in allowing the women to leave the enclosure was two-fold: not only were the nuns accused of being wandering and disobedient, *vagas et inobedientes* (Tangl, 266), faults that Lull seems to consider even worse than unchastity, but Switha acted on her own authority in allowing the nuns to leave the cloister, by not securing Lull’s permission in advance: *sine licentia et consilio meo* (Tangl, 265; see Fell, 37). Lull’s anger at the women’s transgression demonstrates his strong desire to keep them strictly enclosed, and to assert his own authority over their—and especially the abbess’s—activities. He effectively removes the abbess’s authority over the nuns, placing all members of the convent under his own control.³³

These accounts of the Anglo-Saxon nuns affiliated with the Boniface mission suggest that nuns may have chafed under strict enclosure; they may have wanted more freedom to move beyond the cloister, or at least freedom to regulate their own movements. The abbess Switha, in the example above, lacks the supervisory control practiced by early Anglo-Saxon abbesses such as Hild. Certain sources suggest that unlike Wethburg, the Anglo-Saxon anchorite in Rome (but perhaps like Switha's nuns), not all women submitted voluntarily to exile or claustration. The twelfth century saw the rise of the genre of *planctus monialis*, the lament of the unhappily or unwillingly professed nun. The oldest known example of the genre survives in a twelfth-century manuscript, but the bitter tone and intense loneliness found in the *planctus* glance backward to the letters of nuns such as Berthgyth and Egburg, even as they point forward to the unhappy nuns of the later Middle Ages:

Heu misella!
 nichil est eterius
 tali vita!
 Cum enim sim petulans
 et lasciva,

Sono tintinnabulum,
 respeto psalte[rium],
 gratum linquo somnium
 cum dormire cupere[m]

—heu misella!—

pernoctando vigilo
 [cum] non velle[m];
 iuvenem amplecterer
 quam libenter!

. . . .

Ago trabe circulum,
 pedes volvo per girum,
 flecto capu[d] supplicum,
 [non] ad auras tribu[m],
 heu misella!

Manus dans, [in] c[or]di[bu]s
 rumpo pec[tus]

linguam [te]ro dentibus
verba promens.

Woe is me, nothing is more degrading than such a life! for,
though I am made for love and play,

I have to ring the chapel-bell, to chant the psalter over
and over, to leave my dear dreams when I long to sleep—
woe is me—and stay awake all night against my will. How
gladly I would fly into a lover's arms!

· · · ·

I pace the floor, walking round and round, I bow my
head submissively, not raising it heavenwards, woe is me;
giving in, my heart bursts with grief, but as the words come
out I bite my tongue.³⁴

This lament presents many of the themes and concerns that plagued both Boniface and the female speakers of the elegies: the female sexual desire to transgress the claustral boundary; the emphasis on past pleasures and the dissatisfaction with present circumstances; the loneliness and solitude of pacing within one's confinement; the desire to spill the "word-hoard" and express emotion. The *planctus* speaker's movements as she chants the psalter and paces in her cell in the early hours before dawn are, in fact, sharply evocative of the activities described by the speaker in "The Wife's Lament." As Daichman writes, "There is almost unbearable sorrow in the lament of the nun, but there is also anger at the memory of all she has been forced to leave behind, therefore, no matter how mournful the song, the longings of the flesh still come through; 'cupiditas' will not be vanquished by 'caritas'" (69).³⁵ She might well be describing the speaker of either female elegy.

It was not rare for medieval English girls or women to be forced into the cloister for religious, legal, social, or political reasons, typically either as child oblates (cf. Rudolph's Life of Leoba), or—in the case of older girls or women—to benefit male relatives or dissatisfied husbands. As Barbara Yorke has recently written, "some royal women were undoubtedly disposed of against their will and it is not always clear whether all those who retired from the position of queen really wanted to do so."³⁶ Eileen Power described later medieval convents as a "'dumping ground' for unwanted and unwilling girls";³⁷ similarly,

Yorke suggests that Anglo-Saxon convents “provided convenient places in which male relatives could place female kin whom they wanted removed from active life” (Yorke, 102). On the other hand, Anglo-Saxon law codes confirm the benefits of the convent for the Anglo-Saxon widow with similar family troubles. According to Hollis, “the church offered an alternative form of protection if [the widow’s] own family were dead or otherwise unable to aid her in maintaining possession of property against her husband’s relatives.”³⁸ Such practices resonate in the Old English female lyrics. In “The Wife’s Lament,” for example, not only does the woman suffer exile on account of the secret plotting of relatives, but the poem carries the impression of a woman speaking from beyond the grave, a position that was at least symbolically accurate.³⁹

Stephanie Hollis suggests an imaginative connection between the elegies and monasticism, by linking “Wulf and Eadwacer” to the decline of the Anglo-Saxon system of double monastic houses governed by an abbess:

Inasmuch as the monasteries were the seminal site for the construction of generic alterity, the undying lament of the woman in *Wulf and Eadwacer* will serve with particular aptness as an elegy for the double monastery: ‘Wulf is on one island, I am on another . . . unlike are we’. (300)

In spite of the intriguing possibilities of this connection, however, the female speaker and Wulf do not share “separate but equal” status; rather, the contexts of monastic regulation of female movement, and the increasingly strict demands for female enclosure, traced above, suggest ways that the culture of female monastic enclosure may condition the female elegies. Involuntarily enclosed, the speakers of “Wulf and Eadwacer” and “The Wife’s Lament” offer a tantalizing glimpse inside enclosure, even as they seek to break down the walls of their confinement by focusing narrative attention not on their spiritual release but on their physical containment.

“Wulf and Eadwacer”

The presence of the Old English female elegies in the Exeter Book invites the possibility that monastic language, imagery, or ideology

may be deeply embedded within popular, seemingly secular poems about women's laments for their lost lords.⁴⁰ The speaker of "Wulf and Eadwacer," isolated on her fen-surrounded island, images the strictly enclosed female religious of the early Middle Ages. The physical fact of her enclosure is described within the poem, but more importantly, because she protests against this condition, and because she suggests the barest possibility of escape, the enclosed condition acts as the force that shapes her identity. At nineteen lines, the poem is brief and enigmatic enough to merit quoting in full:

Leodum is minum swylce him mon lac gife;
willað hy hine aþecgan, gif he on þreat cymeð.

Ungelic is us.

Wulf is on iege, ic on oþerre.
Fæst is þæt eglond, fenne biworpen. (5)
Sindon wælreowe weras þær on ige;
willað hy hine aþecgan, gif he on þreat cymeð.

Ungelice is us.

Wulfes ic mines widlastum wenum dogode;
þonne hit wæs renig weder ond ic reotugu sæt, (10)
þonne mec se beaducafa bogum bilegde,
wæs me wyn to þon, wæs me hwæpre eac lað.

Wulf, min Wulf, wena me þine
seoce gedydon, þine seldcymas,
murnende mod, nales meteliste. (15)

Gehyrest þu, Eadwacer? Uncerne earne hwelp
bireð wulf to wuda.
þæt mon eaþe tosliteð þætte næfre gesomnad wæs,
uncer giedd geador.⁴¹

It is to my people as if one gave them a gift.
They intend to kill him if he comes into [their] troop.

It is different with us.

Wulf is on one island, I am on another.
Enclosed is that island, surrounded by fen.
Bloodthirsty men are there on that island.
They intend to kill him if he comes into [their] troop.

It is different with us.

I thought with hope of my Wulf's long journeys;

when it was rainy weather and I sat lamenting
 then the warrior enclosed me in his arms (in branches?)
 It was pleasant for me (till?) then, yet it was also hateful
 to me.

Wulf, my Wulf! My hopes of you
 have made me sick—your rare visits—
 mournful in mind, not lack of food.
 Do you hear, Eadwacer? Our pitiful whelp
 Wulf bears to the woods.
 One may easily rend that which was never joined:
 Our song together.⁴²

The act of “writing” a poem, of voicing resistance to the structures of enclosure, creates this elegy’s gendered self. The poem is both narrative text and woven textile (a metaphor the speaker herself employs in the penultimate line), and thus her creative act is both subjective and material.⁴³ Just as it links the creative acts of textile and textual production, the poem displays the dual impulses of popular and monastic traditions. This duality pervades the female Old English elegies: the *winileodas* famously prohibited by Charlemagne in the Capitulary of 789 seem closely linked not only to the nuns’ letters in the Boniface correspondence, but also to the language and imagery of the Old English female elegies.

In “Wulf and Eadwacer,” the speaker clearly delineates her space from Wulf’s, her (apparent) lover, but her descriptions of the islands are impossibly obscure. Because the antecedents are ambiguous, it is difficult to determine which island is secure and surrounded by a fen, and which island contains bloodthirsty men, lying in wait for Wulf. We can determine, however, that like the Anglo-Saxon missionary nuns, the speaker in “Wulf and Eadwacer” is cut off from her loved one by “congregations of waters” (in Dronke’s phrase).⁴⁴ Her isolated enclosure helps us to make some distinctions: “þæt eglond”, refers to its immediate antecedent (“oþerre”); in other words, when she refers to that “latter” island, she means “her” island, as the fen-enclosed space. It is clear, moreover, that bloodthirsty men are pursuing Wulf “on ige.” I would argue that Wulf and the “bloodthirsty men” *must* be on the same island, because there would be little danger to Wulf if he were separated from his enemies by a fen. The “difference” alluded to in the refrain refers to

the speaker's unwilling separation from both Wulf and the rest of her people. It is a difference not only of space or proximity, but also social status, degree, perhaps rank.⁴⁵ The lexically similar forms "iege" and "ige" contrast with the speaker's "eglond" to further support this delineation of what becomes essentially an opposition of public (masculine) and private (feminine) space.

The speaker in this lyric refuses to equate female enclosure with silence. Her concerns are physical—analogous to those contemporary Anglo-Saxon religious women whose letters reveal the same passionate longing for loved ones on earth. At exactly its midpoint, the poem captures the tension between the silence of female enclosure and the vocal expression of worldly desire. The poem moves in lines 1–9 from ambiguous and abstract spatial references ("aþecgan," "iege/eglond/ige," "wæltreowe weras," etc.) to the very specific and concrete images of lines 10–11—rainy weather, weeping, physical violence—before moving back out towards the ambiguous and abstract imagery of the whelp, the song, and the Wulf/wolf. Much as Alain Renoir has demonstrated the sharply telescopic movement of Grendel's approach to Heorot, here in "Wulf and Eadwacer" we move steadily from broad references to the islands inward to the speaker's immediate physical space and her innermost emotions.⁴⁶ We have seen already that the poem makes careful spatial distinctions ("Wulf is on one island, I am on another"). In lines 10–11, the speaker makes analogous temporal distinctions by means of a when-then clause ("þonne . . . þonne"). In line 10, the verb form "reotugu" denotes not a silent or passive lament, but an active vocal expression, perhaps even best translated as "wailing," as her voice breaks through her enclosed solitude.⁴⁷ Immediately, though, her lament is silenced, and here we see one of the poem's greatest mysteries, for who is "se beaducafa" who encloses the speaker in his arms: Wulf or Eadwacer? If we read him as Wulf, the simultaneous joy and pain she feels suggest that her physical pleasure in Wulf's presence is paired with her emotional suffering in anticipating his absence—a perfectly logical reading.

If, however, "se beaducafa" is Eadwacer, he silences her lament through his action of enclosing her, perhaps "pinioning" her, in his arms. In this reading, Eadwacer performs a dual violence on the speaker. He possibly rapes her ("bogum bilegde," if we translate, "surrounded me with his arms") or at least forces her into enclosed

exile (if we translate, “enclosed me with branches”), and he tries to muffle her lament for Wulf. The verb “bilegde” (from *beleggan*, to surround) evokes the Old English verb *belucan*, “to enclose, to lock up.” Both rape and enclosure are masculine attempts to regulate and silence the feminine articulation of passion, of self, and of sexuality. Even the poem’s erratic meter—within only nineteen lines, four a-verses are unaccompanied by the usual b-verses—suggests a break from the strict confining structure of Old English metrics.⁴⁸ The opposition between female voicing and male silencing culminates in the temporally ambiguous line: “wæs me wyn *to þon*, wæs me hwæpre eac lað” [it was joyful for me *up to that point* (till then?); yet it was also hateful to me (line 12, emphasis added)]. Again, as in lines 3, 4, and 8, the carefully balanced phrasing (“wæs me . . . wæs me. . . .”) underscores the strict juxtaposition between pleasurable and hateful feelings. If, following Peter Baker, we translate “to þon” as “till then” or “up to that point” we must view the phrase in temporal terms, in terms of “before” and “after.”⁴⁹ The joy the speaker experienced came from the freedom to articulate her longing for Wulf and not, as many critics assume, from any sexual pleasure she receives from Eadwacer’s violence.⁵⁰ I suggest, moreover, that her pleasure also derives from her self-expression. She felt joy *up to* the moment Eadwacer surrounded her with his arms, while the subsequent violence was hateful to her because it stripped her of the ability to mourn for Wulf. When Eadwacer silences her, he destroys the one consolation she has: giving voice to her unhappiness and longing for Wulf. Analogously, the female writers of the Boniface correspondence seem to derive a similar kind of “textual” pleasure in expressing to their correspondents their loneliness and isolation.

“Eadwacer,” like the name Wulf (“outlaw”), signifies both a proper name, and an epithet descriptive of his function in the poem: “ead” (wealth, riches, happiness) and “wacer” (guardian, watcher).⁵¹ In his possible rape and more certain silencing of the speaker, Eadwacer in effect prohibits her expression of joy; he is the guardian (“wacer”) of her happiness (“ead”), who tries to limit the possibility both of earthly love and of female creative expression.

The poem’s ending provides the speaker’s clearest articulation of a female creativity that exceeds the boundaries of the literal and emotional enclosure imposed upon her by her physical environment and by Eadwacer. In lines 16–19, the irregular use of single half-lines,

like the erratic meter of line 13a (“Wulf, min Wulf”), dismantles the confining structures of metrical correctness. We have seen that the affective, intensely emotional nature of the poem echoes a letter sent by a similarly sorrowful Anglo-Saxon nun: “Quare non vis cogitare, quod ego sola in hac terra et nullus alius frater visitet me, neque propinquorum aliquis ad me veniet? . . . O frater, o frater mi. [Why do you not want to remember that I am alone upon this earth, and no other brother will visit me, or any kinsman come to me? . . . O brother, O my brother].”⁵² The strikingly parallel forms, “Wulf min Wulf” and “O frater, o frater mi” interrupt the rhetorical and structural demands of each text to articulate intense longing.

An even more tangible connection exists between the language of the poem and another text that may have been found in the library (or at least the cultural memory) of the Anglo-Saxon female religious: the Old English version of the gospel according to St. Matthew. The textile metaphors found in the poem’s final lines (“tosliteð . . . gesomnad”) echo the Old English glosses of Matthew 19:6, “ne ge-twæme nan mann. þa ðe god gesomnode.” Similarly, the Latin text of the Lindisfarne Gospels is glossed thus in the Northumbrian dialect: [“þæt forgon god gegeadrade monn ne to-slite/to-sceaða/suindria”].⁵³ The passage is, of course, known today for its use in the marriage service: “therefore what God hath joined together, let no man put asunder.” The direct evocation of the language of marriage to describe the speaker’s longed-for relationship with Wulf is particularly poignant, because it forcefully contrasts her relationships with each of the men. She refuses to name her relationship with Eadwacer as marriage (whatever the nature of that relationship might be), instead inverting the familiar language of the institution to represent a relationship that can only be torn asunder.

The “hwelp” of line 16b, which evidently belongs jointly (as indicated by the dual pronoun “uncerne”) to the speaker and Wulf, presents an additional crux. Critics are generally split over whether the speaker is referring to a child she had, either by Wulf or Eadwacer (perhaps as the result of the rape?), or whether the “hwelp” is figurative, a metaphor for her relationship (probably with Wulf).⁵⁴ The poem explicitly links the “hwelp” and the “giedd”: both are governed by the dual possessive pronoun “uncer” and both nouns represent the results of female creative processes found within domestic and monastic female spheres—namely, childbirth and weaving. In taking

the “hwelp” from her, Wulf removes the only material sign of their relationship. The visible product of their love, the child, is replaced by something more ephemeral: the “giedd,” the text of their relationship.

The textile metaphors “tosliteþ” and “gesomnad” represent the “giedd” as a fabric, a woven textile whose threads can be torn: “þæt mon eape tosliteð,” one may easily slit, “þætte næfre gesomnad wæs,” that which was never seamed (18). As Jane Chance has pointed out, the metaphor “directly inverts that normally characterizing the role of woman.”⁵⁵ In other words, the text(ile) woven by this peaceweaver is not a relationship, but an actual text, the song of their relationship. Like Philomela, the speaker of “Wulf and Eadwacer” weaves her own violent history into a narrative tapestry. The feminine self constructed by the elegy is defined by female monastic experience, not the heroic world; the fabric she weaves is not for the greater glory of God but for the expression of that feminine self-hood, of her own worldly happiness and sorrow. Her final textile metaphors point to the fragility of borders and enclosures and open the possibility of rupture, even as the act of creating a narrative has permitted this speaker to move beyond the confines of prescriptive femininity.

“The Wife’s Lament”

In a popular modern English translation of “The Wife’s Lament,” the speaker describes her situation in an unusual way: “My new lord commanded me into a convent / Of wooden nuns . . . I was forced to live in a nuns’-nest of leaves.”⁵⁶ The imagery of the translation seems at first reading to be merely poetic: the “wooden nuns” represent trees in a forest, and the “nuns’-nest of leaves” is a nicely alliterating and seemingly archaic description of underbrush. Yet this language introduces an element into the poem that is not usually found there by modern readers, since the poem’s original language has not been seen to include religious imagery.

This translation (unwittingly, I suspect) enters the speaker into the realm of Anglo-Saxon female monasticism. The Old English original too, I suggest, shows evidence of this cultural sphere. Regardless of whether the speaker of the poem literally entered a convent, we know that she is exiled and alone. My analysis of “The Wife’s Lament” suggests that the poem’s language constructs its feminine