

The Wife's Lament



Poverty carrying a sack of wheat to the mill reaches a dangerous bridge (about 1450–1475). Rene I d'Anjou, King of Naples. From *Le Mortifement de vaine plaisance*, M.705, f. 38v.

I make this song about me full sadly
my own wayfaring. I a woman tell
what griefs I had since I grew up
new or old never more than now.
5 Ever I know the dark of my exile.

First my lord went out away from his people
over the wave-tumult. I grieved each dawn
wondered where my lord my first on earth might be.
Then I went forth a friendless exile
10 to seek service in my sorrow's need.
My man's kinsmen began to plot
by darkened thought to divide us two
so we most widely in the world's kingdom
lived wretchedly and I suffered longing.

15 My lord commanded me to move my dwelling here.
I had few loved ones in this land
or faithful friends. For this my heart grieves:
that I should find the man well matched to me
hard of fortune mournful of mind
20 hiding his mood thinking of murder.

GUIDE FOR READING

1 To show the rhythmic structure of Old English poetry, this translator has divided each line into two units with a break called a caesura (sĭ-zhōōr'ə). The caesuras signal places where the scop, or poet-singer, probably paused for breath while reciting the poem.

2 **wayfaring**: journeying.

6 **my lord**: the speaker's husband.

7 **wave-tumult**: the sea. Why might the poet have used this kenning?

19 **hard . . . mind**: having a hard life and feeling sad.

Blithe was our bearing often we vowed
that but death alone would part us two
naught else. But this is turned round
now . . . as if it never were

25 our friendship. I must far and near
bear the anger of my beloved.

The man sent me out to live in the woods
under an oak tree in this den in the earth.
Ancient this earth hall. I am all longing.

30 The valleys are dark the hills high
the yard overgrown bitter with briars
a joyless dwelling. Full oft the lack of my lord
seizes me cruelly here. Friends there are on earth
living beloved lying in bed

35 while I at dawn am walking alone
under the oak tree through these earth halls.

There I may sit the summerlong day
there I can weep over my exile

40 my many hardships. Hence I may not rest
from this care of heart which belongs to me ever
nor all this longing that has caught me in this life.

May that young man be sad-minded always
hard his heart's thought while he must wear
a blithe bearing with care in the breast

45 a crowd of sorrows. May on himself depend
all his world's joy. Be he outlawed far

in a strange folk-land— that my beloved sits
under a rocky cliff rimed with frost

50 a lord dreary in spirit drenched with water
in a ruined hall. My lord endures

much care of mind. He remembers too often
a happier dwelling. Woe be to them
that for a loved one must wait in longing.

Translated by Ann Stanford

29 "Earth hall" refers to the speaker's living quarters. What kind of place do you think it is?

42-50 In these lines, the speaker seems to wish for her husband the same sad, lonely life that he has forced her to endure.

Connect to the Literature

1. What Do You Think?

What is your reaction to the story told in "The Wife's Lament"?

Comprehension Check

- What happened after the wife's husband went to sea?
- Why do the husband and the wife live apart?
- What does the wife wish her husband to feel?

Think Critically

2. Evaluate the kind of life the wife has led. Support your evaluation with details from the poem.

3. How would you describe the wife's opinion of her husband's behavior?

THINK ABOUT

- the influence of her husband's kinsmen
- the vow that the husband and the wife made to each other
- the wife's thoughts in lines 42–50

4. In your opinion, how might the husband respond to his wife's accusations?

5. **ACTIVE READING INTERPRETING DETAILS** Get together with a partner and discuss the cluster diagrams of **descriptive details** you created in your **READER'S NOTEBOOK**. What **moods** do the details help convey?

Extend Interpretations

6. **What If?** Suppose that the husband of the speaker in "The Wife's Lament" returned to her. Describe their reunion.

7. **Comparing Texts** Compare the plights of the three poems' title characters. Who do you think faces the most difficult hardships? What makes you think this way? Defend your opinion.

8. **Connect to Life** In the modern world, many refugees leave their countries to escape dangers, not knowing when or if they will ever return to the homelands and people they love. How do you think the loneliness and other hardships they face compare with those endured in Anglo-Saxon times? Cite evidence from the poems to support your opinion.

Literary Analysis

KENNING Anglo-Saxon poets made frequent use of **kennings**, descriptive terms and phrases substituted for simple nouns. In a translation of Old English poetry, a kenning may appear as a compound word, like *wave-tumult*, used for the sea in "The Wife's Lament." A kenning may also appear as a group of two or more words, like *swan road*, another common kenning for the sea. The name *Beowulf* itself can be interpreted as "bee-wolf," a kenning for a bear (because bears like honey and so are often found around beehives).

Cooperative Learning Activity

Identify two more kennings in the poems and explain what they mean. Then copy the chart below and try creating your own kennings for the words in the first column. Discuss your ideas and complete the chart with a small group of classmates.

Term	Kenning
city	
journey	
ship	
tree	
war	

REVIEW ALLITERATION Besides rhythm, the most important element of sound in Old English poetry is **alliteration**, the repetition of initial consonant sounds. Look for examples in all three poems.

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