Wulf and Eadwacer

A Look at Anglo-Saxon Poetry

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Trimaris
Wulf and Eadwacer: A Look at Anglo-Saxon Poetry

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.
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,
þonne mec se beaducafa bogum bilegde,
wæs me wyn to þon,     wæs me hwæþre eac lað.
Wulf, min Wulf!     wena me þine
seoce gedydon,     þine seldcymas,
murnende mod,     nales meteliste.
Gehyrest þu, Eadwacer?     Uncerne eargne hwelp
bireð wulf to wuda.
þæt mon eaþe tosliteð     þætte næfre gesomnad wæs,
uncer giedd geador.

A Brief Overview of Anglo-Saxon Poetry and Oral Tradition in the 10th and 11th Centuries

In the 10th and 11th Centuries, Anglo-Saxon oral tradition was influenced by Scandinavian traditions. It was easy for the traditions of these people to integrate with the invasion of Anglo-Saxon lands by the Scandinavian people due to the linguistic similarities of the two Germanic peoples (Opland, Robinson). Scandinavian words entered the English language and can be found in Anglo-Saxon poetry. Additionally, many well known poems exhibit
Scandinavian themes, further showing the potential influence of Scandinavian traditions on Anglo-Saxon traditions (Opland).

Opland states that according to historical sagas, “it was not uncommon for people to break into poetry on the spur of the moment; such improvised stanzas, independent in their own right and the product of a unique occasion, are called lausavísur.” The culture held the tradition not only of spontaneous poetry but also the tradition of memorized or fixed form poetry. Elements and excerpts from traditional poems may occur in a variety of sagas developed by the poets of the time.

Poems in this time period could take a few forms. Often they were sagas that glorified the activities of rulers or famous men. Oral tradition was also the method of passing on history, and thus poems that were historical sagas or based their own stories on historical events was not uncommon (Opland, Frantzen). Poems of the time could also be an elegy, a type of dramatic poem which would “contrast past happiness with present misery (Robinson).

It is important to remember that these poems were likely performed by the poet but the written manuscripts may be the work of a scribe, not the poet himself, written based on a poets telling of the story.

The Exeter Book

The Exeter Book is one of the most well known collections of Anglo-Saxon poetry. Leofric, who was the first bishop of Exeter, donated it to the Exeter Cathedral in 1072. The Exeter Book, however, was likely written 70 or 80 years prior to Leofric becoming the bishop of Exeter. The separate poems or sections of poems in the book are separated by skipped lines or large capital letters. The book contains folios assembled in gatherings. Wulf and Eadwacer appears in Gathering 13, Fol. 100b and 101a, after Deor and before the Riddles. (Krapp and Dobbie)
Old English Orthography and Spelling

The writing system of Old English is similar to modern day English. Most letters are decipherable to a modern English reader, however, some characters appear only in old English. Below is an image of the Old English alphabet (from omniglot.com)

Yogh, Wynn, can be represented by modern g, w respectively. Ash, Eth, and Thorn are usually represented by their modern day typeface equivalents, æ, ɵ, and þ respectively.

Below are images of the pronunciations of the Old English letters using the International Phonetic Alphabet (or IPA) An IPA chart is included in the back of this paper for reference. (images from omniglot.com)

Vowels and diphthongs

Consonants
Several of the letters have variable pronunciation. Additionally, a few of the pronunciations provided by Omniglot are not correct according to Robinson, and these will be noted. These variations are described below (from Robinson)

/c/:  as [tʃ] before or after original vowels /i/ and /e/ (before umlaut)  
     as [k] elsewhere
/g/:  as [g] when doubled /gg/ or when preceded by /n/ as in /ng/  
     as [j] before the front vowels /i/ and /e/, after /i/ and /e/ when syllable final  
     as [Y] elsewhere
/sc/: Robinson states only the pronunciation [ʃ] and makes no mention of [sk]  
     as a pronunciation for this letter
/f/:  as [v] between voiced sounds  
     as [f] elsewhere
/s/:  as [z] between voiced sounds  
     as [s] elsewhere
/h/:  as [h] initially and before vowels  
     as [c] finally and between consonants
/x/:  Robinson states this is pronounced as [xs], not [ks] as stated by the image above
/u/:  /u/ occasionally appears instead of /w/ and thus has the pronunciation [w]

Notes on linguistic terminology:

Umlaut – Umlaut is vowel harmony. It is a common occurrence in Germanic languages and makes vowels in one part of a word conform in place of articulation (whether the sound is made by the tongue towards the front or back of the mouth) to a vowel in a later syllable of the word.

Voicing – voicing is the distinguishing feature between sounds with otherwise similar features such as place and manner of articulation (where and how you
make the sound in your mouth). Voiced sounds are made by vibrating the vocal folds as air passes through the glottis (effectively, vibrating the vocal chords). The difference is noticeable if you make a long /s/ sound and then make a /z/ sound. The vibration when you make the /z/ is voicing as [z] is a voiced sound and [s] is an unvoiced sound.

The Poem

Wulf and Eadwacer is one of the most controversial poems in the Exeter Book. With an unknown author, it has often been attributed as the first of the Riddles which follow while others view it as a lyric elegy. Many interpretations and translations of the poem have been provided, and scholars still argue the interpretations. While modern transcriptions of the poem use Capital letters for names, it is interesting to note that no proper nouns were capitalized in the original manuscript, leaving the poem open to further interpretation. Additionally, poetry in the book was not separated into lines. Modern transcriptions separate the lines and introduction punctuation according to modern analysis of Oral Theory and interpretation; however, in the Exeter Book the poem appears as a block of text with some punctuation and some spacing which appears slightly longer than others that may indicated a pause. A transcription of the poem in modern English notation from the manuscript follows:

Leodum is minum swylce him mon lac gife willað hy hi ne aþecgan gif he on þreat cymeð ungelic is us. wulf is on iege ic on ðeperre fæst is þæt eglond fenne bi worpen sindon wæl reowe weras þær on ige willað hy hine aþecgan gif he on þreat cymeð ungelice is us Wulfes ic mines widlastum wenum dogode þôn hit wæs renig weder ñ ic reo tugu sæt. þôn mec se beadu cafa bogum bilegde wæs me wyn to þon wæs me hwæþre eac lað. wulf min wulf wena me þine seoce gedydon þine
seld cymas murnende mod nales mete liste gehyrest þu
ead wacer Uncerne eargne hwelp bireð wulf to wuda þæt
mon eaþe tosliteð þætte næfre gesomnad wæs uncer giedd
geador.

**Orthography Notes:**
Þōn – common abbreviation for þonne
I – abbreviation for ond

Below are translations from various sources to show the variety of interpretation in translation:

To my people it is as if one offered them battle:
they will receive him, if he with threat comes.
Unlike is it to us.
Wulf is on one island, I on another.
Fast is that island, by fen surrounded;
fierce are the men on that island:
they will receive him, if he with threat comes.
Unlike is it to us.
My Wulf's wide-wanderings, expected, I endure.
When it was rainy weather, and I sat tearful,
then that battle-bold clasped me in arms:
delight to me, that, yet pain as well.
Wulf, my Wulf, my hopes of thee
sickened me, thy seldom-coming,
a mourning mind, not lack of food.
Hearest thou, Eadwacer? Our sorry whelp
A Wulf bears to woods.
One easily slits what never was joined:
our song together.

-Johnathan A. Glenn, 1982
It is to my people as if one were to make them gifts.
They will destroy him if he comes to their troop.
Our lots are different.
Wulf is on an island, I on another.
That island is a fastness surrounded by fen.
Savage men are there on the island.
They will destroy him if he comes to their troop.
Our lots are different.
I suffered from far-wandering hopes of my Wulf.
It was rainy weather and I sat weeping
when the man brave in the battle gave me shelter.
I was so far glad, but it was also hateful to me.
Wulf, my Wulf, it was my hopes of thee,
thy constant absence and my mourning heart,
that made me sick -- not from lack of food.
Dost thou hear, Eadwacer? Our wretched cub Wulf will bear to the forest.
What never was united is easily torn asunder -- our song together.

-W. S. Mackie

My people have been given a warning:
Will they receive him if he comes with force?
It is different for us.
Wulf is on an island, I on another.
An island of forts, surrounded by swamp.
That island belongs to bloody barbarians:
Will they receive him if he comes with force?
It is different for us.
Hope has wandered in exile with Wulf.
When the rain was cold and my eyes ran red
With tears, when heavy arms reached out and took me
And I suffered pleasure and pain. Wulf,
Oh my Wulf, it was hoping and longing for you
That sickened me, starved for the sight of you,
Bent with a despair deeper than hunger.
Listen Eadwacer! The wolf will carry
Our wretched suckling to the shade of the wood.
It's easy to smash what never existed,
You and I together.

-Burton Raffel

To my people it is as if they give him a gift;
They will kill him if he comes on our host.
It is different for us.
Wulf is on one island, I on another
Secure is that island, surrounded by fens.
Men are slaughter-cruel there on that island.
They will kill him if he comes on our host.
It is different for us.
I thought with hope of my Wulf's wide wanderings
whenever it was rainy weather and I lamenting sat;
whenever the warrior encompassed me with his arms,
it was a pleasure for me to an extent, however it was also loathsome for me.
Wulf, my Wulf! my hopes for you
make me sick: your rare visits,
my mourning spirit, not at all a lack of food.
Do you hear, Eadwacer? Our wretched whelp Wulf carries to the wood.
That man easily severs that which was never united, our song together.

-Jim London

It is to my people as if someone gave them my gift.
They want to kill him, if he comes with a troop.
It is different for us.
Wulf is on one island I on another.
That island, surrounded by fens, is secure.
There on the island are bloodthirsty men.
They want to kill him, if he comes with a troop.
It is different for us.
I thought of my Wulf with far-wandering hopes,
Whenever it was rainy weather, and I sat tearfully,
Whenever the warrior bold in battle encompassed me with (his) arms.
To me it was pleasure in that, it was also painful.
Wulf, my Wulf, my hopes for you have caused
My sickness, your infrequent visits,
A mourning spirit, not at all a lack of food.
Do you hear, Eadwacer? A wolf (Wulf) is carrying
our wretched whelp to the forest,
that one easily sunders which was never united:
our song together.

-Jack Watson

To my people, one such as he is like sporting game.
They will destroy him if he approaches their gathering.

We are not the same.
Wulf is on an island–I am on another.
There on that island, surrounded by fens,
Dwell bloodthirsty men.
They will destroy him if he approaches their gathering.

We are not the same.
Wandering far, I suffered–longing for my Wulf.
When the weather turned rainy, I sat weeping.
A valiant man then folded me in his arms,
For which I was grateful, however hateful it was to me.
Wulf, my Wulf. It was not a lack of food,
But a lack of you that caused me to fall ill.
Do you hear, Eadwacer? Our wretched whelp

Wulf bears into the woods.
That which was never united can be easily destroyed–
Our song together.

- Stán Cynedóm
Many interpretations of the poem have been developed by scholars. There can be any numbers of characters from some views stating it is just two, the woman and one other, while others state it is much more, such as the woman, her lover, her captor, and her son. Some scholars view the elegy as the lamenting of a woman who is forced to be with the tyrannical husband, Eadwacer, while away from her true love Wulf. Others view Wulf as the husband, with Eadwacer the captor of the women. An additional view of the poem is that of a mother with a son, versus a woman and her lover, where Wulf is the son kept away from her by war. Some scholars believe that the ‘whelp’ at the end of the poem is the women’s child, with Wulf the father who will save the son from Eadwacer.

Some scholars have even taken the poem quite literally, that of a female wolf who has a wulf lover and child, and view Eadwacer as the protective dog, due to the possible translation of Eadwacer not as a proper name, but as “ead wacer” meaning “Property Watcher”. This interpretation as ‘ead wacer’ has also been used as evidence to some of the more serious interpretation variations listed in the previous paragraph. Evidence is also taken from the possible translation of “wulf” not as a proper name, but as “outlaw”, common in both Old English and Old Norse. This variation supports the woman with her captor, or with her new husband while her true lover is away, an outlaw, unable to be with her. Other variations in interpretation exist, but the in depth examination of these meanings would be a research paper in itself.

Poetic Interpretation and Performance

Based on several translations of others and based on glosses of the words in the original Old English poem, I have edited my own translation that follows the interpretation of the poem true to elegy form, of a women lamenting her lover who is no longer near, and in a miserable situation with Eadwacer. I will interpret Eadwacer as both a name, and
more in the lines of the “Property Watcher” translation, where the woman is, in some way, his captive, though also now his wife, while Wulf, her true lover, is away an unable to save her.

In my interpretation, it is a women who, perhaps, was given to a man, Eadwacer, in order to save her people, thus why her people were given a gift. She has been taken to be with Eadwacer on an island; however, her lover, Wulf, is on a nearby island with his men who could save her, but he cannot because the will kill him. The woman longs for Wulf, and hates Eadwacer, her captor, but still feels relief in the feel of being with a man, but feels hate that it is Eadwacer, not Wulf. She cries for Wulf and says that she is sick from missing him, and that her sickness is caused only by the emotional weight of loving him while he is absent, not from something material such as a lack of food.

In the end, the woman threatens her captor, Eadwacer, and says that Wulf will come and, figuratively, save her and take her away with him to the wood (the “wretched whelp” is their ill-fated love). However, the woman realizes that this is impossible, and states sadly that it is easy to keep herself and Wulf apart when they were never allowed to be together, as she was never able to marry Wulf (‘giedd’ can translate literally as ‘song’ or more figuratively as ‘vow’), and now has Eadwacer as a husband.
Wulf and Eadwacer

To my people, it is as if someone has given them a gift
They intend to kill him if he comes to them with a band of men,
It is different for us
Wulf is on an island and I on another
That island is secure, surrounded by fen
There, on that island, are bloodthirsty men!
They will kill him if he comes with a band of men!
It is different for us
Long journeys of hope for my Wulf, I pursued
Whenever it was rainy weather and I sat crying
When that warrior took me in his arms
For me it was a relief, but it was also hateful
Wulf, my Wulf! My hopes for you have caused
This sickness, your absence,
My mourning heart; not lack of food
Do you hear me, Eadwacer? Our wretched whelp,
Wulf will bear to the woods!
One easily tears asunder that which was never joined,
Our song together.

Performance

Keeping in mind my translation, I have chosen to perform this
elegy as the ‘spontaneous’ poem discussed by Opland, as Opland states
that women were never poets. Thus, my performance is that of the
woman speaker, who is the captive of Eadwacer.

Costuming

Anglo-Saxon women of the 10th Century wore slightly tailored
gowns with wide, voluminous sleeves, occasionally girdled by a sash.
While women of Anglo-Saxon origin in the country covered their hair,
women of Scandinavian descent often wore their hair in a bun or plait.
**Wulf and Eadwacer**

Old English with line-by-line Modern English translation

Leodum is minum swylce him mon lac gife;
*To my people, it is as if someone has given them a gift*

willað hy hine aþecgan gif he on þreat cymeð.
*They intend to kill him if he comes to them with a band of men,*

Ungelic is us.
*It is different for us*

Wulf is on iege, ic on oþerre.
*Wulf is on an island and I on another*

Fæst is þæt eglond, fenne biworpen.
*That island is secure, surrounded by fen*

Sindon wælreowe weras þær on ige;
*There, on that island, are bloodthirsty men!*

willað hy hine aþecgan gif he on þreat cymeð.
*They will kill him if he comes with a band of men!*

Ungelice is us.
*It is different for us*

Wulfes ic mines widlastum wenum dogode,
*Long journeys of hope for my Wulf, I pursued*

þonne hit wæs renig weder ond ic reotugu sæt,
*Whenever it was rainy weather and I sat crying*
þonne mec se beaducafa bogum bilegde,
*When that warrior took me in his arms*

wæs me wyn to þon,    wæs me hwæþre eac lað.
*For me it was a relief, but it was also hateful*

Wulf, min Wulf!    wena me þine
*Wulf, my Wulf! My hopes for you have caused*

seoce gedydon,    þine seldycmas,
*This sickness, your absence,*

murnende mod,    nales meteliste.
*My mourning heart; not lack of food*

Gehyrest þu, Eadwacer?    Uncerne eargne hwelp
*Do you hear me, Eadwacer? Our wretched whelp,*

bireð wulf to wuda.
*Wulf will bear to the woods!*

Þæt mon eaðe tosliteð    þætte næfre gesomnad wæs,
*One easily tears asunder that which was never joined,*

uncer giedd geador.
*Our song together.*
Works Cited


