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MURDERING THE NARRATOR OF THE WIFE'S LAMENT

The Old English poem *The Wife's Lament*, famously difficult to interpret, has elicited a number of conflicting readings, re-readings and interpretations.¹ Some scholars have kept strictly to the text, while others have allowed themselves more leeway in their interpretation.² The most commonly held view is that the poem is spoken by a woman, separated from her husband, who talks about her situation, past and present. A major question is the location of the narrator. What exactly is an *eorðscraef*, often translated as 'earthhole' or 'grave,' and what is the Wife doing in it? Why does she have to remain there?, Finding it difficult to understand why a woman would be living in a hole in the ground, in the middle

of nowhere, with no apparent means of support, Elinor Lench advanced the idea that the Wife is dead and speaking from the grave.³ The Wife, Lench suggests, has been murdered by her husband; and the cause of her murder would most likely be that she has been accused of adultery. The reason for assuming that the Wife has been accused of adultery is, according to Lench, that the Wife's seeking *folgah* 'service' caused *dyrne gehopt* 'secret/dark thoughts' amongst her husband's kinsmen. Lench relies on the context of the lament in the poem to justify her assumption that *dyrne gehopt* in this case refers to accusations of adultery.⁴ In order to explain why charges of adultery led to murder, she states that in Anglo-Saxon society "Adultery . . . was punishable by death".⁵ To support this statement she refers to Sharon Turner, *The History of the Anglo-Saxons from the Earliest Period to the Norman Conquest* (Philadelphia, 1841), page 147, and to John Thrupp, *The Anglo-Saxon Home* (London, 1862), pages 26, 51, 318–19.

Lench's theory of a ghost speaking from the grave proved attractive to subsequent scholars. Raymond P. Tripp Jr. (1972) and William C. Johnson Jr. (1983)⁶ have both written articles based on Lench's theory of a dead narrator, and Johnson even states explicitly that the theory of the murdered Wife is valid.⁷ In the argument for the narrator's being dead, all three scholars point to the "fact" that the Anglo-Saxons had a habit of killing their adulterous wives. They offer this reasoning with an authority that makes it appear that this practice is a well-known commonplace about Anglo-Saxon society. However, it is not consistent with the sources used to support this "fact." Lench bases her claims that the Anglo-Saxon men treated their wives this way on the words of Sharon Turner and John Thrupp, and appears to consider the authority of these two historians sufficient, almost as though the older the source, the more plausible it is.

The sources, however, do not support the claims. The two-volume *History of the Anglo-Saxons from the Earliest Period to the Norman Conquest*, published in 1841, refers to female adultery and the consequences thereof in three places. On two of these occasions, dealing with the laws of the Christian Anglo-Saxons, Turner states that monetary compensation was used to redress any injuries.⁸ He does not mention corporal punishment at all in this context. The third instance does indeed describe the torturing and killing of adulterous women. The source for this, however, is Boniface's letter to Æthelbald of Mercia,⁹ in which he describes what the continental Saxon women used to do to women who had committed sexual transgressions.¹⁰ Thrupp, in his book, only actually refers to the treatment of adulterous women on pp. 318–19, and again it is Boniface's letter with which we are presented. Thrupp does not try to claim that the treatment described in Boniface's letter was extended to Anglo-Saxon women. Rather, he cites Tacitus and Boniface to show that chastity was important to the Germanic peoples on the continent in "the earlier centuries."¹¹ Yet Lench uses these brief references to

the same source about continental Saxons to make an unequivocal statement that in Anglo-Saxon society female adultery was punishable by death. Because Tripp and Johnson, when endorsing her argument, did not check Lench's sources, this statement begins to acquire the status of a commonplace.¹²

We can only speculate as to why it did not seem to occur to Tripp and Johnson to take a look at the sources Lench used. Perhaps the image of a ghostly narrator was so attractive to them that they did not think to question the reason for her death, or perhaps, and this is in a sense a more worrying reason, their image of Anglo-Saxon society was such that they considered it very likely that women were treated that way. It seems to be quite popular to assume that Anglo-Saxon society was a cruel world, and that women suffered greatly.¹³ It appears that the image of Anglo-Saxon society as heroic and martial by necessity entails that it was also brutal and hostile towards women. It should be noted in this context that the only reason I checked Lench's sources was that I disagreed with her argument that the narrator of *The Wife's Lament* is dead. Had I approved, it is likely that I too would have neglected to check her reading of Turner and Thrupp.

Berit Åström

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¹For a list of articles concerning *The Wife's Lament* see Anne Klinck, *The Old English Elegies* (London, 1992).

² See for example Faye Walker-Pelkey, "'Frige hwæt ic hatte': The Wife's Lament as Riddle," *Papers on Language and Literature* 28:3 (1992): 242–66; Barbara Lalla, "Discourse of Dispossession: Ex-centric Journeys of the Un-living in 'Wide Sargasso Sea' and the Old English 'The Wife's Lament,'" *Ariel* 24:3 (1993): 55–72.

³Elinor Lench, "The Wife's Lament: A Poem of the Living Dead," *Comitatus* 1 (1970): 3–23.

⁴Lench 13.

⁵Lench 15.

⁶Raymond P. Tripp Jr., "The Narrator as Revenant: A Reconsideration of Three Old English Elegies," *Papers on Language and Literature* 8 (1972): 339–61; William C. Johnson Jr., "The Wife's Lament as Death-Song," *The Old English Elegies*, ed. Martin Green (London, 1983): 69–81.

⁷Johnson 70.

⁸Turner Vol. 2 140–1, 230.

⁹Turner Vol. 1 147.

¹⁰*English Historical Documents c. 500–1042* ed. Dorothy Whitelock (London, 1979): B19.

¹¹ Thrupp 318.

¹² In "Adultery in early Anglo-Saxon society: Æthelberht 31 in comparison with continental Germanic Law," *Anglo-Saxon England* 20 (1991): 11–20, Theodore John Rivers suggests that the first written laws, those of Æthelberht of Kent, reflect earlier, pagan practices. These laws state the *wergild* that is due when a woman commits adultery, but there is no mentioning of corporal punishment. Rivers argues that such punishments never took place in England.

¹³ Some examples of this attitude include Robert A. Albano, "The Role of Women in Anglo-Saxon Culture: Hildeburh in Beowulf and a Curious Counterpart in the Volsunga Saga," *English Language Notes* 32 (1994): 1 - 10; Sonia Chadwick Hawkes and Calvin Wells, "Crime and Punishment in an Anglo-Saxon Cemetery?" *Antiquity* 49 (1975): 118–122; Alain Renoir, "A Reading Context for The Wife's Lament," *Anglo-Saxon Poetry: Essays in Appreciation* ed. L.E. Nicholson and D. W. Frese (London, 1975): 224–41.

