

Berit Åström



The Politics of Tradition

Examining the History of the Old English Poems
The Wife's Lament and *Wulf and Eadwacer*

Skrifter från moderna språk 5
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[http:// www.mos.umu.se/forskning/publikationer](http://www.mos.umu.se/forskning/publikationer)

Skrifter från moderna språk 5
Umeå universitet ISSN 1650-304X
Skriftseriens redaktör: Raoul J. Granqvist

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Tryckt av Print & Media, Umeå universitet 2002

ISBN 91-7305-318-X
ISSN 1650-304X

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Acknowledgements

It is sometimes said that writing a doctoral thesis is lonely work, but I have found through the years that it is in many ways a communal effort, and I am very grateful to a large number of people who have helped me in very many ways.

First I would like to thank my supervisor Raoul Granqvist who undauntedly took over as my supervisor halfway through the project. Without complaint he has read many different drafts and suggested ways of improving my text. Not an Anglo-Saxonist, he has provided a fresh perspective on my work and challenged my thinking in many ways. With his help this thesis, and the work behind it, has become a lot more interesting.

I would also like to thank my co-supervisor Margrét Gunnarsdottír who has provided me with much-needed expertise within the field, and patiently watched me try out many different thesis topics without ever losing hope. Fortunately she has reigned me in when my imagination has run away with me.

Professor Sven-Johan Spånberg was my first supervisor and, until his retirement, helped me through the initial stage of my research. He kindly let me try out different routes without pressuring me.

Professor Marijane Osborn of University of California at Davis has also been an invaluable help in her reading and commenting on my text. Her insightful remarks on both context and style have helped to improve my thesis in many ways.

My gratitude also goes to the administrative staff at my department, Gunn-Marie Forsberg, Christina Karlberg and Gerd Lilljegen for administrative and personal help.

My colleagues within the department have made going to work something to look forward to, and I have especially appreciated their interesting conversations during coffee breaks. I would particularly like to thank Pat Shrimpton and Karyn Söderström for moral support when things have got on top of me.

It would have been impossible for me to find my place as a postgraduate without the aid of my fellow postgraduates. To them I have been able to bring my questions about my rights as well as my obligations. I particularly wish to thank my friends in The Bambas Society for Academic Excellence, Katarina Gregersdotter, Malin Isaksson, Maria Lindgren (who, of course, is not a postgraduate anymore) and Mia Svensson, for help and encouragement in my work, as well as much needed relaxation.

Finally I would like to thank my husband, Patrick, for untiring support and encouragement, and for cheerfully putting up with the thankless task of living with the grumpy creature that a postgraduate can be.

Introduction

As an undergraduate, I encountered a Swedish translation of *The Wife's Lament* by Gunnar Hansson.¹ Fascinated by the power of the emotions voiced in the poem, I wanted to know how these emotions were expressed in the original Old English. When I made a prose translation I was surprised to find how much my translation differed from Hansson's translation. As an inexperienced undergraduate, I thought that there must be a "solution" to the poem, so in order to understand it better I read a number of articles on it. Instead of reaching a "solution" to the poem, however, I found that I understood less and less of it. It seemed that it was not certain who the speaker is, whether it is a man or a woman, whom he or she is talking about, or where he or she is living, or if the narrator is even alive, or possibly is a ghost. In short, everything became a source of ambiguity, even though most scholars presented their interpretation as a more or less definitive solution. As I plodded on with my reading, now a post-graduate, I found that the choices of interpretation seemed to fall into a few groups, and that although the choices were often presented as objective, based only on solid facts rather than interpretation, they appeared to be based on the critic's personal view of Anglo-Saxon society as much as on the poem itself. I widened my scope of reading to include analyses of the poem *Wulf and Eadwacer* as well, and found the same plethora of ideas and interpretations. By this stage I was intrigued; not only by the poems, which have the power to engender so many differing readings and opinions, but also by the readings and opinions themselves, and what they tell us about the critics. There seemed to exist very many possibilities and opportunities in the literary criticism of the poems. It is a distinguishing mark, however, of Old English studies, that many critics see these variant possibilities not as opportunities, but as irritating problems to be overcome.

To an undergraduate student, Old English studies² are presented as a unified and unbiased field of information, mainly concerned with philological matters and manuscript studies.³ Beneath this smooth surface, the field is beset by what, to a student, seems like a multitude of problems: damaged manuscripts, difficult vocabulary, unreliable sources, etc. Although these perceived problems affect the whole field of Old English studies, the study of poetry is particularly vulnerable, since the poems often exist in only one copy, and their language is full of rare words. Because of these

¹ Gunnar D. Hansson, *Slaget vid Maldon och sju elegier: fornengelska dikter* (Gråbo: Anthropos, 1991).

² The concepts of *Old English* and *Anglo-Saxon* are often blurred in their use by scholars. Some use them interchangeably, others argue for differences. I will use Old English to refer to the language and literature of a society I call Anglo-Saxon, populated by Anglo-Saxons. Scholars working with Old English texts I will refer to as Anglo-Saxonists.

³ Allen Frantzen has argued that scholars insisting on the exclusivity of the, albeit indispensable, use of traditional, philological methods of study "unfortunately perpetuate the illusion that traditional methods are neutral." *Desire for Origins: New Language, Old English and Teaching the Tradition* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990) 93.

problems, the studies, interpretations and translations of Old English poems yield a host of varying results. What may appear to be a simple task, “just reading the text,” proves, on closer inspection, to be a very complex manoeuvre, where the scholar is negotiating between issues of identity, nationalism, and ideas of gender, as well as coming to terms with the endless deferral of meaning in the poems. Owing to inherent difficulties in the texts the choice of approach becomes vital, and does, in many respects, determine the outcome. Thus what is sometimes presented as an impartial and objective study of a text with a fixed meaning can turn into a highly subjective interpretation, produced, it seems, to support the scholar’s pre-existing assumptions.

This “subjective interpretation,” however, is not to be deplored as falsification or fraud – we no longer think that a scholar is objective and separate from his or her subject – but to be regarded as an inevitable outcome of the human condition. Once we realise that subjectivity is inevitable we can make use of it as an interesting topic of study, in that it reveals the ebb and flow of change in scholarship as well as the freedom of opportunities that the critic has.

The framework of tradition in Old English studies

The scholar’s freedom of interpretation is, however, to a certain extent curtailed by tradition. It is the aim of this thesis to investigate how the tradition of Old English studies has influenced and continues to influence the scholarly reception of Old English poetry. Tradition, in this context, refers to a number of practices, attitudes and approaches, of a conservative nature, that have gradually emerged as Old English studies developed as a scientific field of study.⁴ The tradition rarely manifests itself overtly, but is more often tacitly conveyed and accepted as it instils values and norms concerning, for example, what texts to look at and which methodology to employ in the study of them. The fact that tradition is transmitted and received without comment also makes it possible for the scholar to adopt a position of disinterestedness. In the transition from private motives for studying a text, through the process of publication of the research, the subjective concerns of the scholar are obscured and, “shielded” behind a guise of objectivity.⁵

Allen Frantzen has charted the early development of an academic tradition within several disciplines such as history, English and philosophy, a development which has some of its roots in the Renaissance stress on the importance of knowledge of the Greek and Roman classics and “post-enlightenment ideas of history as the development of human perfection.”⁶ The reliance on knowledge of the classics and the positivistic view of history have also influenced Old English studies, and to a degree

⁴ For a discussion of what he calls “invented traditions,” see Eric Hobsbawm, “Introduction: Inventing Traditions,” in *The Invention of Tradition* ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (1983; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 1-14.

⁵ Allen J. Frantzen, “Prologues: Documents and Monuments: Difference and Interdisciplinarity in the Study of Medieval Culture,” *Speaking Two Languages* ed. Allen J. Frantzen (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991) 1-33, 6.

⁶ Frantzen “Prologue” 7.

they still influence the research carried out. However, according to Frantzen, their influence, as well as the desires and motivations that rule humanistic disciplines are hidden behind discursive formations.⁷

The tradition of Old English studies is involved in the ongoing creation of an Anglo-Saxonist professional identity. This identity is made manifest through a continuity not only constructed from historical documents concerning Anglo-Saxon society, but also through a lineage of scholars that have worked in the field before the present day. The intent of tradition in general, according to Eric Hobsbawm, is two-pronged: to create social cohesion within a professional group and to socialise new members. Within Old English studies this is accomplished by ensuring that critics read the same texts in the same way, as well as socialising new members into the group through “the inculcation of beliefs, value systems and conventions of behaviour.”⁸ The tradition is only made visible when a scholar rejects the conventions. The scholar is brought in line through a number of restraining actions, one of which is the accusation of a lack of formal knowledge of Old English, or of a theoretical grounding. This is a reaction, grounded in tradition, against a scholar defying the socialisation, rejecting the social cohesion of the group.

In this thesis the focus will be on the politics of critics as they move within tradition: their negotiations, appropriations and affiliations in creating a political and professional identity through Old English poetry. The text will chart the movements and currents of this tradition: its conservative beginnings through the paradigm shift of moving from modernist to postmodern ways of reading Old English poetry.

The difficulties that are inherent in, and particular to, *The Wife's Lament* and *Wulf and Eadwacer*, and the choices they necessitate, are factors that make the scholarship they engender such a useful tool for studying the approaches, motivations and alliances of the critics. Both poems are short and cryptic, the identities of the narrators are not made clear, and the poems contain *hapax legomena* that are difficult to interpret from what little context there is. Because of their brevity, some scholars have tried to place the poems within a larger context, as part of Germanic song cycles. Critics have scrutinised the vocabulary or the prosody in order to find ties to Scandinavian or Latin sources or influences. Furthermore, the poems are unusual inasmuch as they are the only Old English poems seemingly spoken by women. This uniqueness has led to the poems being investigated by feminist scholars and used as evidence of the expression of the woman's voice or as being descriptive of the situation of Anglo-Saxon women. This body of scholarship is therefore ideally placed to study the diversity of feminist research within Old English studies. In short, the poems engender responses that are ideal for looking at the influence of tradition on the critics and their readings.

⁷ Frantzen “Prologue” 8.

⁸ Hobsbawm 9.

The material I use consists of a total of 105 essays, articles, and book chapters, published between 1902 and 1999, that all deal with interpretations of *Wife* and *Wulf*.⁹ The articles span a large number of approaches and areas of interest, extrinsic as well as intrinsic readings. Some are closely grounded in philology and investigate language structure, vocabulary, prosody, palaeography, while others are concerned with the context of the poems: the society that spawned them. There are articles that argue for a pagan, Scandinavian tradition and others that promote a Christian, Latinate tradition. Some articles study the poems from the concept of genre, presenting the poems as riddles, ghost stories, laments or love lyrics. Some employ feminist theories or gender theories, others work within a patriarchal tradition. They are all, however, constrained by the same framework of tradition of Old English studies, whether they are following the implicit rules or struggling against them.

Since it is neither feasible, nor desirable, to comment on each article, I have selected a few for closer discussion. They come to represent the whole, but it is important to note that when these articles are commented on, it is not with intent to discredit individual scholars. Their work highlights the complexity of the poetry, and the aim of this thesis is to discuss how scholars respond to this complexity and not in any way to judge their findings. During the course of this thesis I will return to look at the same texts but from different points of view, examining a particular article at one point, for example, for its evidence of identity construction, and at another point for its use of metaphor or metonymy.

Using published articles shows how tradition places restraints on the critics in more ways than one. Not only do the scholars follow implicit rules in their writing, instilled as they are socialised into academia, but the articles are also written to follow the editorial guidelines of individual journals, guidelines that are likewise influenced by tradition. The articles are also vetted and accepted or rejected for publication by the author's peers, who themselves work within tradition. The scholars may therefore suppress deviant attitudes or stress certain favoured approaches and attitudes in order to ensure publication. In order to gain access to a more informal side of tradition, to reach a greater immediacy, the material collected will be supplemented by material I believe has not been used before: the Ansaxnet discussion list.¹⁰ Scholars as well as laypeople with an interest in Old English studies contribute to this list. The discussions carried out there give a more direct access to opinions and emotions than printed essays, since they have not been through the vetting process of publication. The discussions do not always directly concern the poems I am looking at, but they do address the topics of my research. In particular, strategies of professional identity construction are evident in the conversations. Scholars discuss how texts should be read and interpreted and which texts should be introduced to undergraduates. Using these

⁹ From this point I will refer to the poems by the abbreviated titles, *Wife* and *Wulf*, suggested by Bruce Mitchell, Christopher Ball and Angus Cameron. "Short Titles of Old English Texts," *Anglo-Saxon England* 4 (1974) 207-221.

¹⁰ The discussions on the Ansaxnet are stored in the AnsaxDat database: <http://www.mun.ca/Ansaxdat/>.

disparate materials I hope to be able to chart and illuminate some of the many fascinating ways in which Old English studies expresses itself.

Previous research

Looking at critical approaches to Old English texts from the point of view of identity construction is hardly a new phenomenon. In 1917 Eleanor Adams published a study of Old English scholarship between 1566 and 1800.¹¹ In this work she describes how the subject has travelled from humble beginnings amongst antiquarians and politicians of the Reformation confusing “affairs of civil and ecclesiastical life,” using the Old English church as basis for their worldly state,¹² to a scientific field of research, with the establishment of a chair of Old English at Oxford in 1795. The identity construction evident among the scholars she looks at is not investigated or problematised, however, but deplored as unprofessional. Adams’ attitude towards these previous scholars is based on a positivistic mindset: the work they carried out had to be done, but it is now only of interest because of the role it plays as a foil for the progress made by scholars of her own period. Although Adams admits that we are indebted to these scholars of the past, she makes clear that we must realise that their work is “practically worthless to the modern student,”¹³ a point she returns to throughout her work. She is at pains to remind the reader of the antiquarian nature of the efforts of these men and states that much of the work of this period “contribute[s] nothing to Old English scholarship.”¹⁴ Adams acknowledges that we are indebted to these scholars for preserving original manuscripts as well as copies of lost manuscripts. She points out, however, that the “crude” printing of the manuscripts in the sixteenth century “was due not only to the meagre knowledge of the language, but also to the customary careless methods of the age.”¹⁵ The image she depicts of the scholars she studies appears truncated, conflating scholars over several centuries and rejecting their scholarship because it was not scholarly enough. It appears that she views them as failing through a lack of professionalism.

Adams’ study spans about 250 years. A study of a much shorter period has been carried out by E. G. Stanley, whose chosen time span is the nineteenth and early twentieth century. He published a series of articles in 1964 and 1965, which he later revised and published in book form in 1975.¹⁶ Rather than conducting a broad survey of the field, Stanley specifically studies the inscription of paganism into Old English literature and Anglo-Saxon society by British and German scholars influenced by Romantic ideas of a communal Germanic past. Stanley argues that the research of these scholars “exalts whatever in the Germanic literature of the Dark Ages is primi-

¹¹ Eleanor N. Adams *Old English Scholarship in England from 1566-1800* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1917).

¹² Adams 11.

¹³ Adams 5.

¹⁴ Adams 37.

¹⁵ Adams 41.

¹⁶ E. G. Stanley, *The Search for Anglo-Saxon Paganism* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1975). A revised and augmented version was published under the title of *Imagining the Anglo-Saxon Past* in 2000.

tive (that is, pagan) and belittles or even fails to understand whatever in it is civilized, learned, and cosmopolitan (that is, inspired by Christianity)."¹⁷ In Stanley's opinion the "search for paganism" was a fundamental flaw in Old English research of the period he has studied, and he is somewhat unforgiving in his exposure of the scholars who embraced it. His work is important, however, in showing how a tradition was embraced by generations of scholars, and to what extent we are still influenced by this tradition, even if it is manifested differently. Stanley points out that the search for paganism is still going on, even though it is "no longer conducted naively."¹⁸ Pagan aspects of Old English poetry, as we will see, are still investigated in Old English research, but they are not valorised to the same extent now as by those scholars studied by Stanley.

Adams' study of Anglo-Saxon scholarship resonates in a collection of essays edited by Carl T. Berkhout and Milton McC. Gatch, *Anglo-Saxon Scholarship: The First Three Centuries*.¹⁹ Like Adams, Berkhout and Gatch regard the early scholars as enthusiastic but misguided amateurs who let political concerns override scientific study. Berkhout and Gatch try in the introduction to locate the point where "apologetic-polemical motivations" give way to objective research, driven by "more disinterested motives."²⁰ Although no such point can be found, which they readily admit, the assumption is that one type of research gave way to the other, that research after a certain point in time has not been influenced by other motives than scientific interest. The image of Old English research as linear progress from non-scientific amateurism to a professional discipline is also echoed in the title of the first essay of the book: "Antiquary to Academic: The Progress of Anglo-Saxon Scholarship."²¹

The studies performed by Adams and by Berkhout and Gatch do not engage the political concerns of Anglo-Saxonists of previous ages. Adams, as well as Berkhout and Gatch, comments on the use of Old English texts for political purposes, but only as a failure on the part of the critics to recognise what is important about Old English texts. An example of this is Berkhout's and Gatch's brief allusion to the political ideas of *Germanistik* as "unfortunate ... apologetic tendencies."²² The effects of *Germanistik* on the field, however, are not discussed. An essay in *Anglo-Saxon Scholarship* which specifically deals with one of the principle introducers of *Germanistik* into Britain, J. M. Kemble, does not address the political implications of his work.²³ Instead the author charts the professional development of Kemble and his contemporaries, without any reference to other areas of society. In their work, Berkhout and Gatch, as well as Adams, avoid commenting on the fact that the highly politicised use

¹⁷ Stanley 1.

¹⁸ Stanley 122.

¹⁹ Carl T. Berkhout and Milton McC. Gatch ed., *Anglo-Saxon Scholarship: The First Three Centuries* ed. (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1982).

²⁰ Berkhout and Gatch x.

²¹ Michael Murphy, "Antiquary to Academic: The Progress of Anglo-Saxon Scholarship," *Anglo-Saxon Scholarship* 1-17.

²² Berkhout and Gatch x.

²³ Gretchen P. Ackerman, "J. M. Kemble and Sir Frederic Madden: 'Conceit and Too Much Germanism'?", *Anglo-Saxon Scholarship* 167-181.

of Old English texts in the English Reformation did not end there, but continued to shape the field. The concern of these surveys is to show that modern Old English research is part of a professional, specialised and stringent discipline. This goal is achieved by pointing to earlier scholars as naïve, bumbling amateurs, a characteristic feature of scholarship following the paradigm of progress: “[e]ach new generation of scholars is seen as correcting the errors of the previous generation; each age celebrates its own advancement of historical and textual methods.”²⁴ The assumption underwriting these works appears to be that the scientific field stands separate from society and politics, an assumption that is also one of the principal tenets of the tradition of Old English studies.

A scholar who makes few such assumptions is Allen Frantzen. He has published several texts undertaking what he calls archaeology on Old English studies.²⁵ The work I have drawn most from, however, is his book *Desire for Origins: New Language, Old English, and Teaching the Tradition*. Here, Frantzen has looked at “the role of Anglo-Saxon studies in the postmodern Age.”²⁶ This study, like those of Adams and Berkhout and Gatch, looks at Old English research over three centuries, but rather than presenting a linear history of progress, he investigates the image presented by scholars of Old English studies and Anglo-Saxon society. Frantzen also discusses the Reformation in Britain, but he looks at the desire for, and construction of, a national origin through Old English texts in the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, as well as how Old English studies are taught and used today. In his work Frantzen is very much concerned with the politics of Old English studies, as well as with the tradition that shapes the field. As the subtitle of his book, *Teaching the Tradition*, shows, one of his concerns is the socialisation of students into Anglo-Saxonists. He devotes a chapter to the teaching of Old English at universities in the US, in which he points out how prone the field in general is to “[a]ppeals to consensus and authority,”²⁷ and how students in particular are fitted into the moulds of tradition in order to fulfil the requirements.

Another theme running through Frantzen’s work is nationalism and how it makes use of Old English under many different guises. In *Desire for Origins* he shows how the creators of the English Reformation use Old English texts to show that there existed a national English church concurrent with, but separate from, the Roman church. He points to historians of the eighteenth century who look to the Anglo-Saxons for the basis of their own social structures. He also discusses how Old English, through Thomas Jefferson, was an integral part of the forging of the United States,

²⁴ Frantzen *Desire* 8.

²⁵ See, for example, “The Desire for Origins: An Archaeology of Anglo-Saxon Studies,” *Style* 20.2 (1986) 142-56; “Value, Evaluation, and Twenty Years’ Worth of Old English Studies,” *Old English Newsletter* Subsidia 15 (1989) 43-57; “Prologue: Documents and Monuments: Difference and Interdisciplinarity in the Study of Medieval Culture,” *Speaking Two Languages* ed. Allen J. Frantzen (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991) 1-33; “When Women Aren’t Enough,” *Speculum* 68.2 (1993) 445-71; “Who Do These Anglo-Saxon(ist)s Think They Are, Anyway?” *Æstel* 2 (1994) 1-43.

²⁶ Frantzen, *Desire* ix.

²⁷ Frantzen *Desire* 202.

and he shows how nationalist concerns still influence Old English research carried in the late twentieth century.

Nationalism and Old English studies and their use in identity construction also form the guiding idea of a collection of essays that Frantzen has edited together with John Niles.²⁸ This study is made up of two parts, one on Medieval and Renaissance material and one on nineteenth and twentieth century material. The focal point of this book is the study of what Frantzen and Niles call *Anglo-Saxonism*, a process of establishing national and racial identity, which they argue has been “transformed into an originary myth available to a wide variety of political and social interests.”²⁹ Anglo-Saxonism is regarded by the contributors to Frantzen’s and Niles’ book as an idea of a superior social identity, constructed out of ethnicity, culture, tradition and language. In their different essays the scholars chart the trajectory of Anglo-Saxonism through texts and ideas over a period of more than a thousand years. They begin with the Anglo-Saxons themselves, who manifested their ideas of social identity in their laws; then they turn to the English Reformation; and from there to the emergence of Old English studies in the US and Scandinavia in the nineteenth century; concluding with the use of Anglo-Saxonism in Edwardian children’s literature, intended to instil into the children a sense of what it meant to be English. The essays show how Old English texts and ideas about Anglo-Saxon society are appropriated and re-fashioned by different groups to fit the desires of each period, creating a cohesive, communal social identity.

Identity construction through Old English texts is also the subject of another study, *Literary Appropriations of the Anglo-Saxons*, edited by Donald Scragg and Carole Weinberg.³⁰ The study investigates a number of texts, from Layamon’s *Brut* to Tennyson’s “Battle of Brunanburh” to Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, showing how the Anglo-Saxon past is reworked and employed to build a national identity. Scragg states that the volume focuses specifically on the agendas of “creative artists,” since these have not been covered by previous studies, which instead have looked at those of “antiquarians, linguists, and political and ecclesiastical historians.”³¹ In his introduction Scragg mentions manifestations of nationalism in Eastern Europe, Africa and in the shape of devolution in Britain, and states that the English, in contrast to Eastern Europeans, Africans, the Welsh and the Scots, have unclear notions of their own cultural identity and history. This uncertainty, Scragg points out, has not always been the case, and the essays of the book are intended to chart the attitudes of earlier periods towards the cultural identity and history embodied in the idea of the Anglo-Saxons.

The works I have mentioned above approach Old English literature and Old English studies from different angles, some concentrating on providing a survey of scholars and their work, others analysing the appropriations of Old English texts and

²⁸ Allen J. Frantzen and John D. Niles ed., *Anglo-Saxonism and the Construction of Social Identity* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997).

²⁹ Frantzen and Niles, “Introduction: *Anglo-Saxonism and Medievalism*,” *Anglo-Saxonism* 1.

³⁰ Donald Scragg and Carole Weinberg ed., *Literary Appropriations of the Anglo-Saxons* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

³¹ Donald Scragg, “Introduction: The Anglo-Saxons: fact and fiction,” *Literary Appropriations* 1-21, 1.

the political negotiations for which they have been employed. It is my intention to continue in the latter vein, but I will restrict my study to the research that is carried out within academia. I will particularly investigate the traditions governing research, and how these traditions are manifested in terms of the construction of a professional identity, as well as the approaches used by critics, specifically what I call the modes of metaphor and metonymy. The studies discussed, by Niles and Frantzen, Scragg and Weinberg and their contributors, only go up to the mid-twentieth century. It is, of course, impossible to make any firm pronouncements on research that only lies a few years in the past, but I will make a first attempt at charting changes in movements and ideas during the second half of the twentieth century.

These changes have been slow to occur. This conservatism within the field of Old English studies has been commented on by, amongst others, Frantzen in his *Desire for Origins*.³² There he points out that Old English research is carried out from a modernist point of view, reluctant to embrace concepts like Marxism, feminism or deconstruction. Each of these theories is seen as “a pushy, postmodernist late-comer.”³³ In addition to investigating identity construction and metaphoric and metonymic approaches, I will chart this conservatism and its effects on the interpretation of the poems I have chosen.

A brief history of Old English studies

In this thesis I discuss British and American scholarship. In the interest of brevity I therefore restrict this historical overview to Britain, and later to the USA, although it is self-evident that Old English studies in these countries did not develop in a vacuum, but through an interchange of influences and ideas with scholars in other countries.

When scholars began to study Old English they concentrated on historical research. This happened during, and was also to some extent occasioned by, the Reformation. The scholars looked towards Anglo-Saxon society for support for their ideas of a Protestant England. The difficult language and the Renaissance focus on classical texts, among other factors, had previously led to a neglect of Old English texts. In conjunction with the dissolution of the monasteries in England, however, John Leland was charged, in 1533, by the crown with cataloguing their books and manuscripts.³⁴ In the following years politically and religiously motivated people like Leland, John Bale and Archbishop Matthew Parker brought Old English literature to the attention of a wider audience, collecting manuscripts and preparing them for printing. One of the first texts to be published was *A Testimonie of Antiquitie* in 1566,³⁵ prepared by Matthew Parker's son John and Parker's secretary, John Joscelyn. This was a sermon by Ælfric which seemed to support Reformatory ideas about the Eucharist. Old English texts were used to further the cause of the Reformation, allegedly showing that

³² *Desire* 18-22.

³³ *Desire* 21.

³⁴ Adams 12.

³⁵ Frantzen claims that *A Defence of Priestes Marriages* may have been published at about the same time. *Desire* 44.

the Anglo-Saxons had a national church of their own, independent of the corrupt Roman church. John Bale, for example, reinterpreted Bede's tale of Gregory the Great and the Anglian slave boys for his own purposes, in his *The Actes of Englysh Votaryes*,³⁶ claiming that Gregory's interest in them was not spiritual but caused by his Catholic celibacy and thus the lack of a legitimate outlet for his sexual needs.

At the same time as religious texts were being re-used to support the cause of the Reformation, Anglo-Saxon laws were studied by Lawrence Nowell, a member of the household of William Cecil, chief minister to Queen Elizabeth. Nowell published an edition of Anglo-Saxon laws, *Archaionomia*, in 1568, a work which would become popular amongst lawyers at the end of the sixteenth century and the beginning of the seventeenth. The book later came to play an important role when Sir Edward Coke and other lawyers argued their constitutional case against James I and Charles I.³⁷

Scholars like John Parker, John Joscelyn and Lawrence Nowell had to teach themselves Old English through Ælfric's interlinear glossaries, used for teaching monks Latin. In the seventeenth century, however, Old English was taken up as a subject by the universities, grammars were prepared, and a dictionary was published in 1659. The scholarly interest in Old English during this period mainly concerned historical and theological texts, and those were thus the texts edited and prepared for printing. Scholars tended to avoid studying the poetry. They were unfamiliar with the rules and vocabulary of Old English verse, and there was also a feeling that the poetry did not have any practical value: "it could not be used to make profitable points in the discussions of legal, constitutional or ecclesiastical issues."³⁸

Interest in the structure of language continued into the eighteenth century with scholars trying to establish what rules the language followed, publishing their results in Latin. The first work on Old English which presented the language in English was also the first scholarly publication in Old English studies by a woman: *Rudiments of Grammar for the Anglo-Saxon Tongue* by Elizabeth Elstob in 1715.

Apart from linguistic concerns the scholars of the eighteenth century were, like their earlier counterparts, mainly interested in historical or ecclesiastical texts. Publications were made of, for example, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* and Asser's *Life of King Alfred*. Interest in Old English studies waned, however, from the middle of the century, so that research was only carried out by a small group of enthusiasts. The subject no longer formed the basis of political opposition, and scholars influenced by Enlightenment ideas, looking towards classical ideals, rejected those societies and literatures they saw as barbaric. Historians regarded the Anglo-Saxons as achieving the beginnings of political liberty, but they had little regard for the people or their literature.³⁹ As early as 1712, Jonathan Swift published A

³⁶ Frantzen, "Bede and Bawdy Bale: Gregory the Great, Angels and the 'Angli,'" *Anglo-Saxonism* 17-39, 25.

³⁷ Michael Murphy, "Antiquary to Academic: The Progress of Anglo-Saxon Scholarship," *Anglo-Saxon Scholarship* 1-17, 5.

³⁸ Murphy 7.

³⁹ For a discussion of eighteenth century views on Anglo-Saxons as the instigators of Parliament, see Hugh A. MacDougall, *Racial Myth in English History* (Montreal: Harvest House, 1982) Chapter IV.

Proposal for Correcting, Improving, and Ascertaining the English Tongue, where he dismissed Old English as an unfit topic for study, “the vulgar tongue, so barren and so barbarous.”⁴⁰ Later, David Hume, in his *History of England*, first published 1754-62, dismissed the Anglo-Saxons as “a rude, uncultivated people, ignorant of letters ... addicted to intemperance, riot and disorder.”⁴¹ Like many others, Hume felt that it was only the saving grace of the Conquest that allowed the Anglo-Saxons to become civilised.

Interest in Old English studies was rekindled partly through Sharon Turner’s *History of the Anglo-Saxons*, published between 1799 and 1805. In this work, “as readable as a Walter Scott novel,”⁴² Turner managed to rouse English patriotic feelings by connecting the history and the literature of the Old English period. Almost simultaneously a chair in Old English was established at Oxford, partly as the result of the rise of philological study in Old English. There was a flow of ideas between British and continental scholars. Benjamin Thorpe, who would publish the first edition of *The Exeter Book* in 1842, studied in 1826 with the Danish philologist Rasmus Rask, who had published a revolutionary Anglo-Saxon grammar in 1817.⁴³ Continental scholars also came to Britain in the early years of the nineteenth century, bringing different approaches to the emerging discipline, moulding the philology applied to the field.

In the following years Old English studies in Britain grew as a scientific subject. John Mitchell Kemble published an edition of *Beowulf* in 1833, and in 1834 he started a quarrel in the *Gentlemen’s Magazine* which can be seen as the end of the antiquarian approach to Old English studies and the start of the professionalisation of the field,⁴⁴ although there had been professionals in Old English studies for 30 or 40 years. Amongst the charges Kemble made against his opponents was their lack of knowledge of the basics of Old English, and that they approached the task of editing texts back to front: “most have begun by editing books which they could not hope to understand; and though some may have succeeded during the progress of their work in picking up a little of the grammar, the great majority certainly have not.”⁴⁵ This is one of the first voicings of a charge which in different versions during the twentieth century has been levelled against those who use literary theory: that critics who study Old English texts through the medium of theory do so because they lack the necessary grounding in grammar and vocabulary to carry out any “real” research. The quarrel in the *Gentlemen’s Magazine* seemed to be a clash between what was termed “old and Modern Schools of Saxonists,”⁴⁶ between antiquarian interests and a new scientific

⁴⁰ Jonathan Swift, *A Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue* 1712 (Menston: The Scolar Press Limited, 1969) 40.

⁴¹ David Hume, *The History of England from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to The Revolution in 1688* vol. I (1778; Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1983) 185.

⁴² Richard C. Payne, “The Rediscovery of Old English Poetry in the English Literary Tradition,” *Anglo-Saxon Scholarship* 149-166, 155.

⁴³ Murphy 14.

⁴⁴ Adams 110.

⁴⁵ John Mitchell Kemble, quoted by Ackerman 172.

⁴⁶ Ackerman 174.

philology. This scientific philology has come to make its mark on Old English studies to the present day.

During the Enlightenment, Anglo-Saxon history, other than that contributing to the foundation of English liberty, had been neglected because it was seen as barbaric. In the nineteenth century ideas of human progress, influenced by Darwin's theories of evolution, and Kant's theory of "the progression of freedom"⁴⁷ came to influence a view of history which in its British form is called the Whig view of history. History was regarded as not only a description of events, but a justification of the present. Historians were looking at British history as linear progress from the past to the present, the success story of a country and its people: "the story celebrated English (as opposed, mostly, to Scottish, Welsh or Irish) liberty and the institutions that it deemed central to the widening of English freedom through the ages."⁴⁸ The historian Lord Macaulay, for example, speaks of the greatness that Britain "was destined to attain."⁴⁹ Historians were looking for, and finding the roots of the British Empire in the Anglo-Saxon past. Kemble, for instance, wrote that the history of the Anglo-Saxons is "the history of the childhood of our own age,—the explanation of its manhood."⁵⁰ The Anglo-Saxons may have been rough around the edges, scholars stated, but they were "the source of our greatest improvements in legislature, society, knowledge, and general comfort."⁵¹ As Kemble saw it, other countries were politically unstable; he mentions fighting in the streets. However, because Britain had inherited a sound political system from the Anglo-Saxons, and an "equal law," the country was not threatened by disgruntled citizens.⁵² In politics, the fortuitous fate of Britain was seen as closely linked to that of Germany, since, as Henry Lytton Bulwer phrased it: "[i]t was in the free forests of Germany that the infant genius of our liberty was nursed."⁵³ Kemble, through close contact with Jacob Grimm, was influenced by German theories of philology to such a degree that during the public quarrel in the *Gentleman's Magazine* he was accused of being too dependent on German ideas, and in his *Beowulf* of having turned Anglo-Saxon into "German Saxon."⁵⁴

These Germanist ideas imported to Britain by Kemble and by continental students of Old English would shape Old English studies for a long time. The ideas of nationalism and race that moved through the rest of Europe naturally left their mark on Britain as well. Many scholars came to view Anglo-Saxon society as an offshoot of Germanic societies, and lingering notions from the Romantic period manifested themselves in readings of Old English poetry that privileged pagan and heroic aspects. During this period the idea of the meddling cleric was spread: the idea that monks,

⁴⁷ MacDougall 90.

⁴⁸ Michael Bentley, *Modern Historiography: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1999) 63.

⁴⁹ Thomas Babington, Lord Macaulay, *The History of England* (1848-61; London: George Routledge and Sons, 1907) 1

⁵⁰ John Mitchell Kemble, *The Saxons in England: A History of the English Commonwealth till the Period of the Norman Conquest* vol. 1 (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1849) v.

⁵¹ Sharon Turner, quoted in MacDougall 93.

⁵² Kemble v.

⁵³ Lytton Bulwer quoted in MacDougall 91.

⁵⁴ Ackerman 173.

who had no appreciation of poetic beauty, copied pagan texts and distorted them by inserting Christian sentiments, with what Jacob Grimm referred to as “the blighting touch of Christianity.”⁵⁵ The Anglo-Saxons who had been seen by Reformation scholars as devout members of an *Ecclesia Anglicana*⁵⁶ were now celebrated as Romantic pagans.

The philological approach suited modernist ideas which began to spread in the early years of the twentieth century. Modernism assumed that there existed a truth which could be found, and argued for “the undesirability of metaphysics and all form of blurredness.”⁵⁷ The philological approach later received competition from new theories of reading and interpretation, some of them developed by American scholars, such as New Criticism and Oral Formulaic theory. Some scholars also began to apply exegetical, or patristic, criticism to Old English texts.

New Criticism was the first approach to offer an alternative to philology. Scholars who embraced this theory left history and philology in order to pursue issues of aesthetics. They tried to show that Old English poetry was art, and as such was of more than historical and linguistic interest.⁵⁸ The earliest proponents of this approach had a clear political agenda, in that they saw literature as “‘a conscious ideology for reconstructing social order’ in the years after the first world war.”⁵⁹ Later scholars were not so outspoken in their political aims. New Criticism made it possible, however, to speak of “literary merits” where none had previously been found, and scholars like Stanley B. Greenfield, through the use of close reading, showed new aspects of Old English literature, demonstrating “the persuasive power of close reading to disclose the harmonies, balances, and patterns of texts.”⁶⁰

The ideas of New Criticism were later challenged by Oral Formulaic theory. One of the first discussions of this theory was an article by Francis P. Magoun in 1953.⁶¹ Magoun, building on the research of Milman Parry and Albert Bates Lord, argued that oral poetry, which he regarded Old English poetry to be, consists entirely of formulas of varying length and does not have a fixed text until it is written down, an idea at odds with the postulations of New Criticism. Magoun saw Old English poetry as an example of a folk tradition of oral composition stretching back through the centuries and being the same type of composition that Tacitus described in his *Ger-*

⁵⁵ Frantzen *Desire* 70.

⁵⁶ Murphy 2.

⁵⁷ Bentley 138.

⁵⁸ Roy Liuzza, “The Return of the Repressed: Old and New Theories in Old English Literary Criticism,” *Old English Shorter Poems: Basic Readings* ed. Katherine O’Keeffe O’Brien (New York: Garland, 1994) 103-147, 107.

⁵⁹ Frantzen, quoting Terry Eagleton and Gerald Graff, *Desire* 79.

⁶⁰ Frantzen *Desire* 78.

⁶¹ Francis P. Magoun, Jr., “The Oral-Formulaic Character of Anglo-Saxon Narrative Poetry,” *Speculum* 28 (1953) 446-67; reprinted in *An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism* ed. Lewis E. Nicholson (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1963) 189-221.

mania in the first century AD.⁶² Magoun's suggestions have later been adopted and developed by scholars such as Carol Braun Pasternack and A. N. Doane.⁶³

If Oral Formulaic theory stressed the unfixedness and popular origin of Old English poetry, exegetical criticism instead placed emphasis on learned, literary texts. Exegetical criticism, very forcefully put forward by D. W. Robertson Jr.,⁶⁴ argued that all medieval literature sprang out of a Latin, Christian context, and that it was impossible to understand vernacular literature without this framework.⁶⁵ Exegetical criticism also maintained that all medieval literature, be it religious or secular, was allegorical. We will see the recurrence of this idea in some of the research on *Wife*.

These different ways of looking at Old English poetry: philology, New Criticism, Oral Formulaic theory and Exegetical criticism were the main influences in Old English studies for many years, with philology perhaps being the strongest of these influences, and they cast long shadows. Later approaches such as post-structuralism, postmodernism, postcolonialism, semiotics and feminism have not been able to gain much foothold in the field. In 1989, Daniel Calder claimed that in Old English studies "the pre-Saussurean confidence in 'scientific' versions of both empiricism and historicism seems to have survived relatively intact." Calder, surveying the research of the preceding twenty years, came to the conclusion that

[w]hile the rest of the world of letters has been turned upside down by various new theories and approaches, the yearly bibliographies in the *Old English Newsletter* hardly reflect even a ripple from these earthquakes that have so severely shaken all the other areas and periods of English literature.⁶⁶

Part of the blame for this theoretical inertia Calder places on scholars such as E. G. Stanley and Stanley Greenfield. Calder states that they have taken it upon themselves to defend the field against what they perceive as misreadings, caused by, in the opinion of Stanley, lack of philological knowledge.⁶⁷ These are charges we recognise from Kemble and his colleagues. On the Ansaxnet some scholars have lauded the imminent death of theory, and expressed the hope of a return to a more scientific stance. Michael Drout has stated that Old English studies are closer to natural science than literary studies of later periods.⁶⁸ Critical works based on postmodern theories

⁶² Magoun 191.

⁶³ See, for example, *Vox Intexta: Orality and Textuality in the Middle Ages* ed. A. N. Doane and Carol Braun Pasternack (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991).

⁶⁴ D. W. Robertson Jr., "The Doctrine of Charity in Medieval Literary Gardens: A Topical Approach Through Symbolism and Allegory," *Speculum* 26.1 (1951) 24-49; reprinted in *An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism* ed. Lewis E. Nicholson (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1963) 165-188.

⁶⁵ Frantzen *Desire* 79.

⁶⁶ Daniel G. Calder, "The Canons of Old English Criticism Revisited," *Old English Newsletter* Subsidia 15 (1989) 11-21, 14.

⁶⁷ Calder 16.

⁶⁸ Michael Drout, "Re: Justification," Ansaxnet 28/5 2002.

have also been referred to as dealing with “gee-whiz stuff,” suggesting that the resistance to theory is still thriving in some quarters.⁶⁹

The development of Old English studies during the twentieth century is mirrored in the interpretations of *Wife* and *Wulf*. In the early part of the twentieth century these poems attracted almost no interest, quite possibly because they seemed to resist demands for clarity and resolution, whilst at the same time they were not obviously linked to a Germanic, heroic literature. Between 1902 and 1950 there were only two articles published on *Wife* and four on *Wulf*. These six articles are either discussions of linguistic difficulties in the texts or attempts at linking them to Norse or Germanic literature. This direction of research was followed for the next three decades and beyond. Scholars tried to provide backgrounds for the poems, either as parts of song cycles, or by constructing a plot that would explain the action of the poems; perceived linguistic and structural anomalies were investigated and some scholars tried to establish whether the poems were Christian or pagan.

In 1976 came the first article that suggested that female characters in Old English poetry warranted study on their own terms.⁷⁰ Two of those characters were the narrators of *Wife* and *Wulf*. This article was followed the year after by a study of wider scope by Bernice Kliman, in which she compared women in Old English literature with women in Middle English.⁷¹ In the following years there was a trickle of articles dealing with women in Old English poetry, but not many employed feminist theories, and it can generally be said that, with a few exceptions, scholars have been as reluctant to use feminist theories as they have been to use other contemporary theories such as poststructuralism or deconstruction.

Theoretical background

Old English studies began as part of philology, and philology still has a strong grip on the field: grammar, palaeography, manuscript studies, editing, and related topics constitute a large part of the research carried out in the field. This study of the mechanics of Old English literature has been termed *method* by Allen Frantzen. He has set this concept up as the opposite of *meaning*, literary interpretation.⁷² In Frantzen’s opinion, method is privileged over meaning by many Anglo-Saxonists. Method is regarded, so to speak, as “hard science,” objective and producing tangible results, whereas meaning is “soft science,” full of conjectures and producing results open to debate. The philological bias leads, according to Frantzen to a

concept of professional discipline in which method is always seen as prior to and productive of meaning, isolated from interested social circum-

⁶⁹ Norman Hinton, “Re: Justification,” Ansaxnet 28/5 2002.

⁷⁰ Elaine Tuttle Hansen, “Women in Old English Poetry Reconsidered,” *Michigan Academician* 9 (1976) 109-17.

⁷¹ Bernice W. Kliman, “Women in Early English Literature, ‘Beowulf’ to the ‘Ancrene Wisse,’” *Nottingham Mediaeval Studies* 21 (1977) 32-49.

⁷² Frantzen *Desire* 18-19.

stances and linked to technological improvement (more method) and therefore neutral.⁷³

In view of this tradition “looking at critics looking at poetry” may seem to some Anglo-Saxonists a somewhat pointless enterprise, as only so much navel gazing.⁷⁴ In his study of changing theoretical approaches in Old English studies during the early twentieth century, Roy Liuzza forestalls critique by comparing this kind of research to pointing out an object to a dog, whereupon the dog looks at the finger rather than the object.⁷⁵ Liuzza goes on to stress, however, that this kind of research is important since criticism influences other critics. Each new reading builds on those carried out before. What has been said before is therefore not unimportant, and to argue that there is an option of studying *Wife* and *Wulf* without taking into account the work of other scholars is misguided.⁷⁶

Because Old English studies are so strongly guided by traditional approaches to language history and historiography, it seems only reasonable to try and step outside tradition when attempting to study the manifestations of it. In order to do so I have drawn upon the ideas of New Historicism in my analysis. This approach is, of course, developing its own tradition, even though it has been claimed that there is, as yet, no model nor any instructions for applying New Historicism;⁷⁷ yet it is at least a developing tradition at odds with the dominant tradition I investigate. Where the tradition of Old English sees a long line of indisputable facts, seamlessly joining up to form a non-conflicting image of Anglo-Saxon society and its literature that can only be interpreted along a certain fixed set of lines, New Historicism allows a more impressionistic view of the same field, where not all questions can be answered, some questions only produce further questions, and the critics themselves are very much part of the object studied. New Historicism cannot explain every aspect of the chosen subject. It will not present a smooth surface, a “solution to Old English studies,” but as Stephen Greenblatt says: “[a] criticism that never encounters obstacles, that celebrates predictable heroines and rounds up the usual suspects, that finds confirmation of its values everywhere it turns, is quite simply boring.”⁷⁸

The tradition of Old English research often treats texts as if they never change. When a query concerning the interpretation of, for example, a line in *Beowulf* is

⁷³ Frantzen *Desire* 93.

⁷⁴ See, for example, George Clark’s message on the Ansaxnet on 10th June, 2001, under the heading “Re: I’d like to know more about the meaning of AS Paganism please?,” in which he questions the relevance of Eric G. Stanley’s study of German Anglo-Saxonists and the biases of their research, in Stanley’s *The Search for Anglo-Saxon Paganism*.

⁷⁵ Liuzza 103.

⁷⁶ For an example of this view, see Peter Baker’s comments on what he calls the “critical anarchy” of *Wulf and Eadwacer*. “The Ambiguity of *Wulf and Eadwacer*,” *Studies in Philology* 78.5 (1981) 39-51, 40.

⁷⁷ Sonja Laden, “Greenblattian Self-Fashioning and the Construction of ‘Literary History,’” *Critical Self-Fashioning: Stephen Greenblatt and the New Historicism* ed. Jürgen Pieters (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1999) 59-85, 62.

⁷⁸ Stephen Greenblatt, “Resonance and Wonder,” *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism: A Reader* ed. Kiernan Ryan, (London: Arnold, 1996) 55-60, 59.

raised, the immediate concern of the scholars is how it would have been understood by its “original” audience, not how it has been read since and is read today, or its possible, alternate readings. As Jerome McGann puts it: “[e]very text has variants of itself screaming to get out or antithetical texts waiting to make themselves known.”⁷⁹ These variants and antithetical texts are not part of the tradition of Old English studies. It is rarely acknowledged that every new reader is implicated in the work on these poems. New Historicism, however, can be said to rescue the texts from a “living death”: “no work of art is inherently and forever doomed to function in a conservative manner, since the work’s effect is liable to change as the context of its reception changes.”⁸⁰ In this thesis I look at how the poems change when read by different critics, as they attempt to negotiate the tradition. My study questions those approaches and affiliations that critics employ because “that is how it always has been done,” readings based on what seems to be “common sense” or “well-known” facts, what Roland Barthes calls “the decorative display of *what-goes-without-saying*.”⁸¹

Traditional historiography within Old English research desires an objectivity that cannot be realised. As McGann has stated: “criticism must factor itself and its own mediations into its explanations.”⁸² The critic must therefore also realise that she or he contributes to the material studied. In this study claims are made as to the biases of scholars who analyse *Wife* and *Wulf*, but I realise that I myself am biased, and can hope at best to give a minimally slanted and partial image of how Old English studies are constructed. The structuring and interpreting of the collected material can instead be seen to produce what Sonja Laden has called a “virtual” history, a “conceivable” version of events.⁸³ The claims I make about the approaches, alliances and results of the scholarship on *Wife* and *Wulf* are based on my readings, and are as such, biased; I can only claim that my “virtual history” is one way, out of many, of looking at them.

In this introduction I have located Old English within a framework of tradition, and shown how the field has grown within and through this tradition. It is now time to move on to my “conceivable” version of events. This begins in *Chapter One: Tools and Terms*, where I present the concepts that have been useful in the organising and structuring of my material. Roman Jakobson’s use of the terms *metaphor* and *metonymy* in linguistic and literary studies, and also their application to Old English studies, as suggested by Gillian Overing, has turned out to be most helpful. Historiography is an integral part of Old English studies, and historiography and identity are both aspects of Allan Frantzen’s concept *desire for origins*, which is another term I have found useful. Furthermore, I discuss the concepts of *identity* and *alterity* which are vital components in my research.

⁷⁹ Jerome J. McGann, *The Textual Condition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991) 10.

⁸⁰ Kiernan Ryan, Introduction to Section Two of *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism* 42.

⁸¹ John Storey, *An Introduction to Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*, (1993; London: Prentice Hall, 1997) 81. Original emphasis.

⁸² Jerome J. McGann, *Social Values and Poetic Acts* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1988) 117.

⁸³ Laden 61.

Chapter Two: Old English Poetry and Anglo-Saxonist Scholarship outlines a selection of Anglo-Saxonists' ideas of, and approaches to, Old English texts in general, and poetry in particular. I make an attempt at summing up briefly a very disparate and fascinating field of research, which hopefully will give the reader some understanding of the shaping forces at work. Furthermore, there is a discussion of the poems I work with: *Wife* and *Wulf*. The scholarship they have generated is multifaceted and most interesting, and warrants a lengthier discussion than there is room for in this thesis. The intention in chapter two, however, is to give a brief overview of previous research and interpretations, and this will, I hope, provide an insight into the challenges the poems present to a reader.

Having supplied the reader with the necessary tools for following my argument, I proceed in *Chapter Three: Identity Construction* to investigate identity construction through Old English studies. I touch upon ideas of nationalism, but most of the chapter is devoted to the construction of a professional identity through the search for a Germanic or Latinate ancestry, and a search for literary and cultural continuity.

Chapter Four: Metaphor and Metonymy is narrower in scope, moving from identity construction to ways of reading of the poems: scholars' use of metaphoric and metonymic approaches. I show differing ways in which scholars using the metaphoric mode of interpretation try to close the texts and fix the meaning, whereas scholars reading in a metonymic way try to open the poems up to allow for multiple interpretations.

Chapter Five: Feminist Studies draws together the discussions of the two previous chapters in a discussion of feminist studies of Old English texts seen through ideas of identity construction and the use of metaphor and metonymy. I investigate how some feminist critics use a metaphoric approach when they read the texts so as to make them yield feminist role models, and look at some metonymic approaches to genre and ideas of textual femininity.

Chapter Six: Conclusion sums up the findings I have made during my studies of this material and discusses the implications for the field of Old English studies that tradition has had and will have.

Finally, I have added what I have called a "coda," which contains some musings on where scholars might wish to take the study of Old English poetry in the future.

Following this coda are two appendices. The first consists of printed editions of *Wife* and *Wulf*, taken from the *Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records III*,⁸⁴ as well as translations into modern English of the poems. In the light of my discussions of the difficulties of preparing printed editions as well as the subjectivity of translations, it should be pointed out that I have not chosen these editions and translations because I regard them as being superior to others. They have been chosen purely out of convenience. I have also included as an appendix the bibliography I have compiled of criticism of *Wife* and *Wulf*. I make no claims regarding its completeness, but it is a starting point for those who wish to examine the critical work on *Wife* and *Wulf*. There are other

⁸⁴ George Philip Krapp and Elliott van Kirk Dobbie ed., *Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records III, The Exeter Book* (1936; New York: Columbia University Press, 1966).

bibliographies one can turn to: *A Bibliography of Publications on Old English Literature to the End of 1972*⁸⁵ and *The Old English Elegies: A Critical Edition and Genre Study*.⁸⁶ This appendix is, however, the only one containing material up to the end of the twentieth century.

⁸⁵ Stanley B. Greenfield and Fred C. Robinson ed. *A Bibliography of Publications on Old English Literature to the End of 1972* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980).

⁸⁶ Anne L. Klinck, *The Old English Elegies: A Critical Edition and Genre Study* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 1992).

Chapter One: Tools and Terms

The body of research on *Wife* and *Wulf* is very diverse, striving in many directions, exploring a great number of differing ways of understanding the poems. In order to organise this sprawling material, this multitude of opinions, I have gathered a few concepts to use as tools. When applied to the same material, each concept highlights different aspects of the critical research. The concepts I have found to be of most help in my work are *metaphor* and *metonymy*, *anamorphosis*, *identity* and *alterity*.

Metaphor, metonymy and anamorphosis

In his study of aphasia as a linguistic problem, Roman Jakobson discusses the metonymic and metaphoric poles of language.¹ He begins by exploring two different ways in which aphasia may manifest itself, based on what he sees as the twofold character of language. He divides language into two areas: similarity and substitution, and context and contiguity. According to Jakobson, patients suffering from aphasia exhibit disorders stemming from either one of these areas, what Jakobson calls *similarity disorder* and *contiguity disorder*. Similarity disorder entails an impairment in the ability to select and substitute, a difficulty with metalinguistic operations, whereas contiguity disorder is a difficulty with combination and contexture, an inability to maintain “the hierarchy of linguistic units.”² From this argument Jakobson goes on to link these two disorders with the concepts of *metaphor* and *metonymy*. He states that discourse may develop in two different directions; one topic of conversation leads to another either through their similarity or through their contiguity. He names the first metaphoric and the second metonymic. Jakobson points out that in normal conversation both operations take place at the same time, and that it is only in aphasic patients that we see one operation dominating another. Yet individuals may favour one mode of speech over another.

Jakobson claims, however, that in literature we see these operations functioning more distinctively, according to genre. He gives as an example Russian lyrical songs, which tend to favour metaphoric constructions, whereas heroic epics favour metonymic constructions. Jakobson states that Romanticism and symbolism are predominantly metaphoric, whereas realism tends towards the metonymic pole. He observes that scholars prefer the metaphoric mode, since it is an easier tool to use, or as he puts it: “the researcher possesses more homogeneous means to handle metaphors, whereas metonymy, based on a different principle, easily defies interpretation.”

¹ Roman Jakobson, “Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances,” *Fundamentals of Language* (S-Gravenhage: Mouton & Co., 1956) 55-82. The following section is based on this essay.

² Jakobson 76.

Jakobson's use of the metaphoric and the metonymic applies mainly to linguistic usage. Other scholars have extended them to the act of reading and interpreting texts as well. Gillian Overing has used Jakobson's theories in her analysis of *Beowulf*.³ The metonymic mode, according to her, concerns itself with details, refraining from organising them into a unified whole, which is the domain of the metaphoric mode. Metonymy resists closure and resolution. Overing presents a list of characteristics that are typical of the metonymic mode:

flexibility of association and meaning; resistance to conclusion or decisive interpretation; avoidance of interpreting one thing in terms of another in favor of seeing those things for themselves; deferral, which can be indefinite, of resolving meaning into a static or fixed core; emphases on the here-and-now of immediate perception, on the process and experience of meaning construction rather than on its end-product.⁴

The metaphoric mode, on the other hand, moves "toward resolution of a juxtaposed dyad into a third overarching, meaning-encompassing element" and privileges product over process.⁵ As is evident from her explanation of the different concepts, Overing privileges metonymy over metaphor.

Overing argues for a metonymic reading of *Beowulf*, striving towards an open-ended reading, allowing for conflicting messages, unsolved cruxes. Overing claims that Old English poems "embody the free interplay of signification elements made possible by the absence of a governing center, or metaphoric overview."⁶ Applying Overing's list of characteristics on the scholarship on *Wife* and *Wulf*, the approaches of scholars may be distributed along the axes of metaphor and metonymy. Amongst scholars employing the metaphoric mode we find a search for a fixed meaning, a solution to end all questions. Other metaphoric readings look for similarities/substitutions between texts or cultures. They look for the source of the text they are studying, trying to fix the meaning by deciding on the source of phrases, sentiments or arguments within the text, or they may look for similarities or analogies between the Anglo-Saxon culture and other cultures, historical or modern. Old English research has traditionally been carried out in this metaphoric mode.

Just as the study of the metonymic mode in language has been slow to develop, according to Jacobsen, so have metonymic readings of Old English poetry. Attempts at metonymic studies have been met with suspicion by proponents of the metaphoric mode.⁷ The metonymic readings of *Wife* and *Wulf* tend to look at emotions and atmosphere; they are content to acknowledge difficulties in interpretation without showing

³ Gillian Overing, *Language, Sign, and Gender in Beowulf* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990).

⁴ Overing 8.

⁵ Overing 8.

⁶ Overing 6.

⁷ See, for example, Alexandra Hennessey Olsen's review of Gillian Overing's book in *Speculum* 67:4 (1992) 1024-1026. Olsen fears that "the postmodern craze for indeterminacy and fractured consciousness" will destroy *Beowulf* for its readers. 1026.

concern at a lack of solution. The critics do not expect to achieve a “definition” of Old English texts that is “correct” and “true.” All we can do, they argue, is to look at details, and how they relate to each other and other texts.

A concept which, like metonymy, allows for a deferral of meaning is *anamorphosis*. The dictionary definition of anamorphosis is a “distorted projection or drawing of anything, so made that when viewed from a particular point, or by reflection from a suitable mirror, it appears regular and properly proportioned; a deformation.”⁸ This definition gives a negative impression of the concept, but in literary criticism it can be used for positive purposes in interpretations of texts. To use Laden’s definition, anamorphosis is “a mode of perception where under certain conditions distorted (figurative) images/objects appear to be undistorted or ‘normal’ (literal).” One way of employing this mode of perception is to allow one’s reading to “oscillate between several levels of meaning at virtually the same point in time,”⁹ that is, allowing a text to be both figural and literal at the same time. As Laden points out, the movement between distorted/figural and undistorted/literal perceptions is “unsettling” and “disturbing.”¹⁰ I argue, however, that it can also be a liberating way of reading Old English poetry. In the poems *Wife* and *Wulf* the reader encounters words and concepts that have several possible meanings. One example is the word *sið* in *Wife*, which can mean both ‘journey’ and ‘fate.’ Scholars have traditionally been trying to establish which of the possible meanings of a word should be used in reading these poems. If one instead uses anamorphosis, the reader can allow a concept to oscillate between two or more meanings, thus giving the text an added richness. Emily Jensen has written an article on the meaning of the word *eorðscræf* in *Wife*, a word that can mean ‘earth-cave’ as well as ‘grave.’¹¹ Her query is whether the word should be seen as a figural or literal sign, whether the narrator is actually living in a hole in the ground, or whether the word is a metaphor for her emotions. Perceived through anamorphosis the cave can be a figural and a literal sign at the same time, allowing for interplay between different layers of meaning, creating a richer poem than we would have if we restricted our reading to only one mode of interpretation.

Identity

It is often stated that identity is not fixed, but constantly negotiated, resting “on a number of bases relating to nation, ethnic group and gender, plus a wide range of cultural confirmations and stimuli.”¹² Yet identity is one of those troublesome concepts within academia that take on different meanings for different people. On a very general level, identity is the idea of a self separated from individuals surrounding us. However, there are a number of different ways of looking at identities and how they

⁸ Oxford English Dictionary Online <http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/00007922>, 10/10 2001.

⁹ Laden 74.

¹⁰ Laden 75.

¹¹ Emily Jensen, “‘The Wife’s Lament’s’ *Eorðscræf*: Figural or Literal Sign?” *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 91 (1990) 449-457.

¹² Bentley 151.

are constructed.¹³ Identity as discussed through psychoanalysis is different from the ideas of social identity and cultural identity. Psychoanalytical approaches to identity deal to a great extent with the internal workings of the mind, and ask the question whether we can really speak of a stable subject creating its own identity. My thesis is more concerned with the outward signs of identity work as manifested in research and publications, and for this I find ideas of social and cultural identity more useful. I will look at how the Anglo-Saxonist constructs a social and national identity through the use of Old English texts. I reserve the right, however, to refer to psychoanalytical work when it illuminates my material.

In an article from 1990 Stuart Hall postulates two different positions, two “ways of thinking about” cultural identity.¹⁴ The first position is to view cultural identity as a shared culture, a common past with “common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as ‘one people’, with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning.” This position sees cultural identity as a fixed object to which an individual either belongs, or does not. It exists as an artefact separate from the people who share this identity. This is the attitude to culture that we find in, for example, the history writing of Macaulay. It is assumed that there is an “English” identity which is easily definable and that any given individual is either “English,” or not. There is no fluidity, nothing in-between, no one is “semi-English,” there is no moving between identities.

The second position defines cultural identity as a process, a constant negotiation. As Hall puts it, it is a “matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being.’” Cultural identity is not a stable, unchanging object. It is subject to the changes of time, and rather than being the recovery of historical facts that will “secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past.”

It is the second position that Hall explores in his later work on cultural identities. He points out that structuralism and poststructuralism have questioned whether we can speak of a stable subject. Quoting Foucault, Hall claims that what we need is “not a theory of the knowing subject, but rather a theory of discursive practice.”¹⁵ Identities take place within representation and are constructed through the relation to the Other, the “constitutive outside.”¹⁶ Since the presence of a knowing subject is doubtful, questions of agency have come to trouble Hall and other theorists of identity. Are we creating our identities, or are they created for us? Referring to Foucault, Hall argues that the subject is produced “through and within discourse, within specific discursive formations, and has no existence, and certainly no transcendental continuity or identity from one subject position to another.”¹⁷ For the purposes of this thesis I

¹³ Stuart Hall, “Introduction,” *Questions of Cultural Identity* ed. Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay (London: Sage, 1996) 1-17.

¹⁴ Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference* ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990) 222-37, 223. The following quotations are taken from pages 223 and 225.

¹⁵ Hall *Questions* 2.

¹⁶ Hall *Questions*. The quotations are from pages 2 and 4.

¹⁷ Foucault, quoted by Hall in *Questions* 10.

will not venture into the question of agency, but will concentrate on the identity processes and negotiations that seem to be carried out by Anglo-Saxonists in their work on *Wife* and *Wulf*. I will simply assume that the scholar is creating an identity for him- or herself through the choices and interpretations he or she makes.

Many discussions of identity constructions and cultural identities concern negotiations between two or more contemporary cultures, specifically in a postcolonial setting where people negotiate between cultures of unequal dominance. Hall, for example, studies the intersection of West Indian culture with that of white Britain. Other studies look at the culture emerging in former colonies, where the “natives” are constructing identities different from those imposed by their former masters.

What concerns this thesis, however, are the negotiations between the contemporary culture of Anglo-Saxonists and the re-constructed, assumed culture of the Anglo-Saxons. This means that not only is an identity constructed, but that it is based on a culture which does not exist outside the field of Old English study. One might argue that Anglo-Saxon culture is created by the scholar herself. This means that discussions of identity construction within the field of Old English studies will necessitate their own specific parameters. Identity construction, as discussed in cultural studies, is often based on the assumption of post-colonials forming their identities in the space “in-between,” as Homi K. Bhabha expresses it,¹⁸ between the dominant and the “native” culture. Resistance is often featured. In the case of Anglo-Saxonists the premise is somewhat different. Quite often the subjects are themselves members of a dominant culture, white and western, and the culture they seek out is by many seen as the basis of imperialist British culture. The language of cultural studies thus sometimes jars with the subjects discussed, and it is also understandable that in the current academic climate, it can become embarrassing to appear to liaise with a dominant, oppressive culture. Yet ideas of the construction of cultural identity can be used as tools to structure the discussions of the construction of a professional identity within Old English studies. Hall’s “second position,” viewing identity construction as a process, is a good way, I argue, to look at how students are first moulded into Anglo-Saxonists through exposure to selected Old English texts, as well as theories and ideas of Anglo-Saxon society, and afterwards, as scholars, create a professional identity based on their notions of this society. This thesis will not, to any great extent, be concerned with the initial moulding, but will be restricted to identity construction through interpretations of *Wife* and *Wulf*.

Alterity

One cannot discuss identity without bringing in the concept of *alterity*. The dictionary definition of the word is “the state of being other or different,” “otherness,”¹⁹ but al-

¹⁸ Homi K. Bhabha, “Cultures In-Between,” *Questions of Cultural Identity* ed. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (London: Sage, 1996) 53-60.

¹⁹ *The Oxford English Dictionary* online 7/6 2002.

terity is a complex concept, put to different uses by different critics. It has been described, for example, as the reverse of *mimesis*, which is the ability to imitate, to mimic something or someone. Walter Benjamin saw mimesis and alterity as two components of a rudimentary compulsion to imitate, to become the Other, “slipping into Otherness, trying it on for size.”²⁰ According to Michael Taussig, Benjamin’s idea of alterity is thus a desire to *become* the Other. In its most basic usage, however, alterity is often regarded as the idea of an *opposition* between Self and Other, and sometimes the word comes to symbolise the Other. As important as the parts of which we construct our selves are the parts that we reject. In order to know what we are, we also need to know what we are not. This thing that we are not is characterised by alterity, by otherness. Emanuel Levinas, for example, speaks of a “logical alterity which identifies individuals and concepts and distinguishes them from one another.”²¹ Taussig claims that “all identity formation is engaged in this habitually bracing activity in which the issue is not so much staying the same, but maintaining sameness through alterity.”²² Anthropologists have demonstrated that human societies often relegate to the Other the unpleasant characteristics and feelings that they do not wish to admit to possessing: what psychoanalysis calls projection. Feminist scholars have shown that in many cultures women fulfil the role of the Other, together with monsters and other threats. Alterity has also been deployed as a tool in analysing racism. In a study of the Cuna people of Central America, and their relationships to other peoples, specifically during the Panama Canal project, Taussig uses the concept of alterity when he refers to a “mosaic of alterities, with its hierarchies of attraction and repulsion.”²³

We see that there is some slippage in the meaning ascribed to, and the use of, alterity. To Benjamin it is a positive aspect of the human condition, something which we strive towards. To other critics it is a negative concept, describing the things that we reject and fear. To this latter category we may perhaps also assign the use Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak makes of the word when she discusses Derrida’s definition of the Unconscious. The Unconscious, Spivak explains, which is the “something that is at every moment divisively other yet indispensable to the production of the same,” is the “best available name ... for radical alterity.”²⁴ Another negative use of the word is Michael Dutton’s and Peter Williams’ term “alterity practices,” which they define as “those essentialising, populist cultural techniques which confer identities by demarcating ‘we’ and ‘they.’”²⁵

In medieval studies the word appears, at least on the surface, to be less charged, neither positively nor negatively. The habits, traditions and beliefs of the medieval

²⁰ Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1993) 19, 33.

²¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence* (London: The Athlone Press, 1999) 29-30.

²² Taussig 129.

²³ Taussig 144-61, 148.

²⁴ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Revolutions That As Yet Have No Model: Derrida’s ‘Limited Inc.’,” *The Spivak Reader* ed. Donna Landry and Gerald Maclean (New York: Routledge, 1996) 76-106, 83.

²⁵ Michael Dutton and Peter Williams, “Translating Theories: Edward Said on Orientalism, Imperialism and Alterity,” *Southern Review* 26.3 (1993) 314-57, 344.

world are as divorced from the scholar as that of any pre-industrial society existing concurrently with ours. When reading medieval texts the scholar must keep in mind the alterity of those societies, that religion, for example, played a different role, and that religious observances and traditions, or the power of the Pope, to give but a few examples, carried more weight and importance than they do to the secularised scholar.

One of the first to articulate a theory of alterity concerning medieval studies was Paul Zumthor in his *Poétique Médiévale*, but it has been further discussed and developed by Hans Robert Jauss. Both Zumthor and Jauss work mainly with French texts of a later date than the Old English texts that are the focus of my thesis, but their theory of alterity is applied by Anglo-Saxonists to Old English texts as well. The idea of medieval alterity is the “surprising otherness,” as Jauss puts it, of past ages.²⁶ He argues for a different outlook on life exhibited by medieval people and, specifically in the area Jauss concentrates on, a different attitude towards writing and authorship. This notion of an “otherness” has also been used within other areas of historical research, for example, when Phillipe Ariés studied the idea of childhood in the Middle Ages and came to the conclusion that medieval people cared little for children,²⁷ an idea that has remained influential for decades.

Just how “Other” the Middle Ages are to our “Self” is difficult to assess, and the scholar is required to perform a balancing act between complete alterity and complete identification. The work of Jauss and Zumthor may have encouraged some scholars to rely too much on the otherness of the Middle Ages in their interpretation of texts and artefacts, especially if one is to believe claims by J. A. Burrow: that their theories are biased by an alterity fostered by the French educational system of the twentieth century.²⁸ Burrow argues that the theories of Jauss and Zumthor are not as universally applicable as has been made out by some scholars, and that the wholesale adoption of the theories of medieval alterity has caused scholars to focus so much on the difference between “us” and “them” that they forget that there are similarities as well.²⁹

Privileging alterity too much may lead to relativism, which might in effect entail a belief that because we are so different from people of earlier ages, there is no point in trying to understand their actions or the literature they produced. Burrow points out that while we are so busy studying what is different we run the risk of forgetting that some aspects of human existence are *not* different, but remain universal and transhistorical. Burrow emphasises that some aspects are different and some remain the same, or as he puts it, paraphrasing L. P. Hartley: “‘The past is in some ways like a foreign country: they do some things differently there.’ Hence visitors to that country can take neither familiarity nor strangeness for granted.” He calls for an attempt towards a balanced view, of reading medieval literature “as literature,” looking for those things that

²⁶“*der befremdenden Andersheit*” Hans Robert Jauss, *Alterität und Modernität der Mittelalterlichen Literatur* (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1977) 10.

²⁷ Philippe Ariés, *Centuries of Childhood: a Social History of Family Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 1962).

²⁸ J. A. Burrow, “The Alterity of Medieval Literature,” *New Literary History* 10.2 (1979) 385-90.

²⁹ J. A. Burrow, “‘Alterity’, and Middle English Literature,” *The Review of English Studies* n. s. 50. 200 (1999) 483-92.

are familiar to us, while at the same time retaining the “awareness of the texts as documents from the past.”³⁰ Burrow is not alone in trying to reconcile alterity with sameness. Abdul JanMohamed has postulated a “syncretic possibility,” whereas Edward Said has turned to the idea of a “human community” in order to absorb alterity.³¹

When Anglo-Saxonists study Old English literature their identity work is as susceptible to the lure of what Laura Brown, recalling Tzvetan Todorov, has called the “‘two component parts’ of alterity, absolute identity or absolute difference” as any other medievalist’s.³² We find that some scholars choose to see Anglo-Saxons as less intelligent than modern people, or ascribe unwarranted brutality to them, whereas others see them, for example, as early feminists or as people concerned with social egalitarianism.

One example of attributing brutality to the Anglo-Saxons is a study by Sonia Chadwick Hawkes and Calvin Wells.³³ They have looked at the findings of an excavation in Hampshire and have come to the conclusion that a woman had been buried alive. This is in itself not a farfetched or fantastical idea. Ritual human sacrifices did occur amongst the early Anglo-Saxons. Skeletal finds suggest that slaves were bound and killed and then buried around the graves of particularly prominent people.³⁴ In the case of the grave studied by Hawkes and Wells, however, there was nothing to suggest a ritual killing. The reason put forward by Hawkes and Wells for the death of the woman was the alleged rape and pregnancy of the victim, which would have so offended the community that they buried her alive. There was no evidence that the healed injuries of the skeleton came from rape, there were no indications of pregnancy, and there is no evidence of Anglo-Saxons punishing the unwilling victims of rape.³⁵ In this case the idea of the alterity of the Anglo-Saxon era appears to have been carried too far. Because there is evidence that the Anglo-Saxons sacrificed slaves for ritual purposes Hawkes and Wells assumed that they would do the same to women who had, willingly or unwillingly, transgressed sexual boundaries. Because they already knew that the Anglo-Saxons were known to have committed acts that are alien to modern scholars, it seems that Hawkes and Wells saw no reason why they should not have committed others as well.

Another work which stresses the alterity of the Anglo-Saxons is Rudolph Bambas’ study of *Wife*.³⁶ He rejects the idea of a female narrator in the poem, for a number of reasons, but one of them is that the audience would not have understood a male *scop*, ‘poet’, pretending to be a woman. That the *scop* would be able to carry out the

³⁰ Burrow “Middle” 492.

³¹ Abdul JanMohamed and Edward Said, quoted in Laura Brown, “The Romance of Empire: *Oroonoko* and the Trade in Slaves,” *Aphra Behn* ed. Janet Todd (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1999) 180-208, 185.

³² Brown 184.

³³ Sonia Chadwick Hawkes and Calvin Wells, “Crime and Punishment in an Anglo-Saxon Cemetery?,” *Antiquity* 49 (1975) 118-22.

³⁴ David Wilson, *Anglo-Saxon Paganism* (London: Routledge, 1992).

³⁵ The results of Hawkes’ and Wells’ study have been severely criticised by Nicholas Reynolds, in his article “The Rape of the Anglo-Saxon Women,” *Antiquity* 62.237 (1988) 715-18.

³⁶ Rudolph C. Bambas, “Another View of the Old English *Wife’s Lament*,” *Journal of English and German Philology* 62 (1963) 303-9.

imitation successfully is unlikely since “so much mimetic capacity in the eighth or ninth century is difficult to believe in.”³⁷ The idea of the alterity of Anglo-Saxon society appears to invite Bambas to see himself as so completely divorced from the Anglo-Saxons that he can claim that it is “difficult to see how the minstrel’s audience could understand that he was miming a woman.”³⁸

Bambas is not alone in over-emphasising the alterity of Anglo-Saxon society. He is merely applying a scholarly method that has been *de rigueur* in the field. As Monica Brzezinski Potkay and Regula Meyer Evitt note:

In the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth ... scholars regularly assumed that medieval texts mirrored their social milieu. These works, they believed, offered a simple view of contemporary life because their authors were simple – in every negative sense of that term.³⁹

It is all too easy to believe that people divorced from us in time or place are fundamentally different, even when the evidence suggests otherwise.

I mentioned above that a medievalist who is not attracted by alterity may opt for complete identification instead. Some scholars may go too far in assuming that the Anglo-Saxons were “just like us.” Some feminist work has taken this route, assuming that Anglo-Saxon women thought and acted just like modern scholars. Some critics have also assumed that Anglo-Saxon society regarded the sexes as being on as much of an equal footing as, for example, in the modern US, regardless of what extant material may suggest. This we see, for example, in Edith Whitehurst Williams’ work on some of the riddles in *The Exeter Book*.⁴⁰ She has chosen to see pre-Conquest England as a modern society where the sexes were equal, at least in sexual matters. She argues that the female sexuality described in the so-called “obscene” riddles of *The Exeter Book* reveals an equality between the sexes in general in Anglo-Saxon society, similar to that of the western world today.⁴¹ Similar postulating has been carried out by, for example, Alexandra Hennessey Olsen in her work on *Wulf*.⁴² Olsen reads the female narrator as a strong woman with what can only be termed as a late twentieth century approach to gender equality. The feminist identification with Anglo-Saxon women is strongly tied to identity construction, I argue; the critics see the Anglo-Saxon women and literary protagonists as very much like themselves, as forerunners and role models. This argument will be explored further in chapter five.

³⁷ Bambas 304.

³⁸ Bambas 309.

³⁹ Monica Brzezinski Potkay and Regula Meyer Evitt, *Minding the Body: Women and Literature in the Middle Ages, 800-1500*. (London: Twayne Publishers, 1997) 2.

⁴⁰ Edith Whitehurst Williams, “What’s So new About the Sexual Revolution?: Some Comments on Anglo-Saxon Attitudes toward Sexuality in Women Based on Four Exeter Book Riddles,” *The Texas Quarterly* 18.2 (1975) 46-55.

⁴¹ I am of course not claiming that the western world is anywhere near total equality, but it appears to be less restrictive than Anglo-Saxon society.

⁴² Alexandra Hennessey Olsen, “Old English Women, Old English Men: A Reconsideration of ‘Minor’ Characters,” *Old English Shorter Poems: Basic Readings* ed. Katherine O’Brien O’Keeffe (New York: Garland, 1994) 65-83.

In this chapter I have described the concepts I employ in my investigation and how they apply to Old English studies. We now turn to a discussion of Old English poetry, and particularly the poems of *Wife* and *Wulf*.

Chapter Two: Old English poetry and Anglo-Saxonist scholarship

Old English poetry, problems and opportunities

In order to understand the complexity of the scholarship on *Wife* and *Wulf* it is helpful to be acquainted with the particular circumstances that the Anglo-Saxonist works under. In the following section I will conduct a general discussion of Old English poetry, not restricted to the two poems that lie at the centre of this thesis.

Old English poetry comes to us, to a great extent, without named authors. The only known poets are Cynewulf and Caedmon. Cynewulf we know because he interwove his own name into his poems using runes, and Caedmon we know from Bede's account.¹ Unlike scholars working with the literature of later periods, the Anglo-Saxonist has therefore not had to engage questions of biography or authorial intent. One might say that as far as Old English poetry is concerned, the author has always been dead. As Roy Liuzza phrases it, "Anglo-Saxonists seldom have biographical information interrupting their analysis of the autotelic text."² One exception to this is some research carried out by feminist scholars, where scholars argue for female authorship. I will return to this issue in chapter five.

The corpus of Old English poetry is quite limited; it is estimated to be about 30 000 lines.³ This places a heavy burden on the individual text, which comes to represent the entire poetic tradition of the Anglo-Saxons. The scarcity of literature has fostered an attitude amongst Anglo-Saxonists towards their material which is perhaps more inflexible than within other fields of literary studies. Allen Frantzen has pointed out that Anglo-Saxonist research tends to treat Old English texts as silent monuments rather than events, in that they look for an "original" text, a pure text of which the extant manuscript is but a copy. This original text then becomes the basis for further study.⁴ Although this is probably too broad a generalisation, Frantzen may have a point. He suggests that such a search for an original text is ultimately futile, and that critics should instead look at the individual manuscript and what has befallen it over the centuries: the history of its interpretation and reception. Anglo-Saxonists sometimes approach texts as if previous research into interpretation and reception is of limited relevance. Instead it is at times argued that previous criticism is an encrustation obscuring the text, and that the critic can access the "true" meaning of the text without taking earlier criticism into account. It has been stated that the studies of *Wulf*

¹ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* trans. Leo Shirley-Price (1955; London: Penguin Books, 1990) 248-51.

² Liuzza 111.

³ Michael Alexander, "The Cult of Anglo-Saxon and the Literary Canon," *Parergon* 10.1 (1992) 1-14, 3.

⁴ Frantzen *Desire* 115-117.

have brought us an embarrassment of riches that threatens to obscure as much as it illuminates, for nearly every critic who takes on this literary puzzle either proposes yet more solutions to its many cruces or brings to our attention cruces that we were not even aware of before.⁵

This attitude is presumably a reaction against the great diversity of interpretations engendered by Old English poetry,⁶ and reveals a desire, on the part of the scholar, to find a definitive solution to the poem.

For a long time there was a lack of discussion of the status of the Old English texts and how they are perceived by later readers, that is, what effect they have on us. The texts were regarded as if they existed in a temporal vacuum, only influenced by the context of their composition.⁷ The texts have sometimes been treated as fixed artefacts that can be measured and weighed, originals that have neither been changed over time, nor are changed by the eye of the beholder. According to Frantzen, the manuscripts are regarded by Anglo-Saxonists as if they were monuments, and the decisions made by editors “are allowed to stand in place of manuscripts and cultural contexts.”⁸ The image of texts as monuments is also what allows a scholar to argue that it is possible to come to a definitive solution of a perceived crux, that it is possible to know what the author really meant, by the use of a certain turn of phrase.

This is not the case with all scholars, however. At the same time as some scholars award the texts the status of uncorrupted originals, others perform a variety of different readings through different, related material, sources and theories in order to produce new meanings. Although this is a perfectly valid approach, at times it appears that the scholar has decided on the result in advance and will read the text accordingly. In a discussion on the work of the lexicographer, Fred Robinson has claimed that the scholar will assign a meaning to a word “not on the basis of lexicographical evidence but purely because his particular critical interpretation of the passage requires such a meaning.”⁹ The desires of the scholar take over the interpretative process.

The idea of Old English texts as uncorrupted originals is also at the base of some historical work on Anglo-Saxon culture. The texts are mined for information

⁵ Peter S. Baker, “The Ambiguity of *Wulf and Eadwacer*” 40. This statement is, however, tempered somewhat by a footnote on the same page in which he explains that “most of these studies have on the whole advanced our understanding of the poem rather than set it back,” followed by an extensive list of such studies. Jerome Mandel claims that *The Wife's Lament* “suffers from too many interpretations.” *Alternative Readings in Old English Poetry* (New York: Peter Lang, 1987) 149-181, 149.

⁶ An example of this diversity is *Wulf and Eadwacer*, which, as we shall see in chapter two, has been read as a human love-triangle or a love story between a dog and a wolf. It has also been interpreted as a piece of text complaining to another that is has been misplaced in a manuscript. Norman E. Eliason, “On *Wulf and Eadwacer*,” *Old English Studies in Honour of John C. Pope* ed. Robert. B. Burlin, Edward. B. Irving Jr. and Marie Boroff (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974) 225-234.

⁷ This attitude is changing, but it has been predominant until at least the middle of the twentieth century.

⁸ Frantzen *Desire* 173.

⁹ Fred C. Robinson, “Lexicography and Literary Criticism: A Caveat,” *Philological Essays: Studies in Old and Middle English Language and Literature in Honour of Herbert Dean Meritt* ed. James L. Rosier (The Hague: Mouton, 1970) 99.

about the Anglo-Saxons and their society. Some scholars see manuscripts, often of uncertain dates, as giving direct access to Anglo-Saxon culture,¹⁰ as if Anglo-Saxon England had at any point been a unified country with a unified culture, seemingly forgetting that there are several obstacles to such an approach. Not only is there the geographical spread to take into account, but also the time span. A manuscript written in the eleventh century may have only limited information to give of the mindset of sixth century Anglo-Saxons, especially if the manuscript and the people in question are from different regions, populated by different tribes. A common practice, not only in literature studies but also, for example, in archaeology and historical studies, is to take the extant laws of Kent and Wessex, and use them to make assumptions about customs and emotions of earlier Anglo-Saxons in other parts of England.¹¹

In this section, I have tried to convey an image of the not so dynamic, perhaps even static, base of Anglo-Saxonist research. As I mentioned in the introduction, new ideas penetrate slowly, and there still exists an unwillingness amongst many critics to see Old English texts as anything but finished, unchanging products, untouched by any processes of reading and interpretation.

Determining the text

Before the scholar can study Old English poetry as literature there are a number of choices that have to be made. One of the first is to decide what text to use as a basis for the research. If the text appears in several, differing manuscripts, which manuscript should be used? Should we, using Lachmann's method of stemmatics,¹² try and find as "early" a copy as possible, that is, as close to the "original" as possible, and work with that; should we choose what Joseph Bédier termed a "best copy," the manuscript which seems to be the most "accurate" of those containing the text in question¹³ or should we take parts from the different manuscripts, creating an "original" that never existed? According to Jerome McGann, textual critics usually work towards the goal of producing a critical edition that "most nearly represents the author's original (or final) intentions."¹⁴ In the case of Old English poetry this is not possible, since we do not even know who the author is. What one can do, however, is to take into account the fate of the text, as it has been transmitted into our time. McGann argues that textual criticism, of which editing is a part, should be seen as a

¹⁰ Frantzen *Desire* 173-74.

¹¹ See, for example, the application of those laws by Sonia Chadwick-Hawkes and Calvin Wells in "Crime and Punishment in an Anglo-Saxon Cemetery?"

¹² For a discussion of the mechanics of stemmatics, as well as a discussion of the pros and cons of this method, see Lee Patterson *Negotiating the Past: The Historical Understanding of Medieval Literature* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1987) 80-93.

¹³ For a discussion of Lachmann's and Bédier's methods as well as their impact on the study of Old French texts, see David F. Hult, "Reading It Right: The Ideology of Text Editing," *The New Medievalism* ed. Marina S. Brownlee, Kevin Brownlee and Stephen G. Nichols (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991) 113-30.

¹⁴ Jerome J. McGann, *A Critique of Modern Textual Criticism* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1983, 1992) 15.

hermeneutic enterprise.¹⁵ He maintains that a divide has opened up between scholars and critics, between those who work with textual criticism and those who work with literary interpretation. In McGann's words: "the angels of hermeneutics have long feared to tread in the fields of textual/bibliographical studies."¹⁶ In his work "The Monks and the Giants," McGann calls for an inclusion of textual criticism into literary criticism, a view of the former as an integral part of the latter, which would enrich both fields. In this way, the transmission history of a manuscript, as well as its content, is brought in to enrich our understanding of the text. It is Frantzen's opinion that McGann has "helped to restore an understanding of textual criticism as a practice that attempts to define various stages of a text's existence, rather than focusing on one moment only and thus culminating in the production of a 'definitive' edition."¹⁷ This attitude to editing and other forms of textual criticism is only now beginning to permeate the field of Old English poetry.¹⁸

Once we have chosen which manuscript to use, it has to be edited for printing, since it is most often not convenient or even possible to work directly with the manuscript. The editor is faced with a number of choices. Amongst those choices are *punctuation*, *emendation* and *spelling/hapax legomenon*. These choices open up a space where the editor's own wishes and beliefs can insert themselves.

One of the first tasks of an editor is to give the poem a title. The title influences the way we read the action of the text. Old English poems come to us without titles, and sometimes it is even difficult to determine where one text ends and the next one begins. Through consensus and convenience the poems of *The Exeter Book* have over the years been given titles but these titles have not always been uncontroversial. When Benjamin Thorpe, in 1842, published the first edition of the poem now known as *The Wife's Lament*, he chose to call it *The Exile's Complaint*,¹⁹ since he believed the narrator to be male. The title is still contested in some quarters, which demonstrates that the title will influence the interpretation.²⁰ The title of *Wulf* has also been contested, since there are arguments for *eadwacer* not being a proper name, but an epithet given to Wulf.²¹ As is easily understood the title awarded to a poem influences the reading of

¹⁵ Jerome J. McGann, "The Monk and the Giants: Textual and Bibliographical Studies and the Interpretation of Literary Works," *Textual Criticism and Literary Interpretation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985) 180-99.

¹⁶ McGann "The Monk and the Giants" 181.

¹⁷ Frantzen *Desire* 90.

¹⁸ For a discussion of emendations in editions of *Beowulf* see AnsaxDat 13/10 2001 under the heading "The Beowulf Text." Clare A. Lees has published an article on editing texts in conjunction with teaching: "Whose Text is it Anyway? Context for Editing Old English Prose," *The Editing of Old English* ed. Donald G. Scragg and Paul E. Szarmach (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1994) 97-114.

¹⁹ Benjamin Thorpe ed., *Codex Exoniensis: A Collection of Anglo-Saxon Poetry From a Manuscript in the Library of the Dean and Chapter of Exeter* (London: The Society of Antiquaries, 1842) ix.

²⁰ In a paper given at the 33rd International Congress on Medieval Studies in Kalamazoo by Mark Aune, Wayne State University, titled "Why a Wife? 'The Wife's Lament' through the Sapir Whorf Hypothesis," he pointed out that when the title was translated from the German *Die Klage der Frau*, editors chose to name the narrator "wife" rather than "woman," which was equally valid, thus ascribing a marital relationship to the poem. AnsaxDat 18/10 1998, heading *Re: Titles for OE poems – Wife's/Exile's Lament*.

²¹ See, for instance, John Adams, "'Wulf and Eadwacer': An Interpretation," *Modern Language Notes* LXXIII:1 (1958) 1-5.

the text to a great extent. Words that are context-sensitive are given a different interpretation depending on how the poem is titled. The most poignant example is perhaps *Wife*, where words of love and sexual yearning are read as words of friendship when the poem is called *The Exile's Complaint*.

The editor will also have to decide under what heading to print the text, what genre to include it in. It is common to refer to a group of poems which includes *Wife* and *Wulf* as elegies, even though it has been debated whether the term is suitable, since it does not really fulfil the criteria drawn up by either classical or Romantic literature.²² As regards *Wife* and *Wulf*, which are most often referred to as elegies, arguments have been put forward for reading both poem as riddles instead.²³

Another example of the impact of the editor's choices is the use of capitals. The introduction of a capital in a significant place can influence the reading of a whole poem. Words like *dryhten* 'lord,' *metod* 'fate' and *eallwealda* 'all-mighty' are sometimes capitalised in editions and assumed to refer to a Christian God.²⁴ This practice, a commonplace within the tradition of editing Old English texts, is not uncontested, however. It removes any ambiguities and favours a Christian interpretation. Exactly how Christian Old English poetry *is*, is the object of a long-standing debate, but the editor's choice of using capitals thus becomes a means of closing the issue before the question has been raised, and certainly in textbooks for students, who have never seen the text before, this choice becomes very influential.

Punctuation is another choice which can alter the interpretation of a text to a great extent. An example is to be found in *Wife*, where the introduction of a full stop between the first and second half-line of line 21 makes quite a difference as to how we see the narrator's husband/lord. If a full stop is used after *blife gebæro*, the narrator is telling us that her husband was planning murder with a cheerful demeanour. This can be used as an argument that the narrator is hostile towards her husband, and that the last lines of the poem should be read as a curse. If, however, a full stop is placed after *morþor hycgendne*, the text can be read as stating that husband and wife pledged their love to each other, and the end of the poem can be read as worry for her absent husband. Another example of the impact of punctuation is the opening lines of *Wulf*, where a full stop at the end of the second line singles out the narrator as separate from her people and places her together with her absent lover, whereas a comma at the end of the second line includes her in the family group and distances her from her lover.

Emendation sometimes becomes a necessity when printing Old English texts. It can, however, also become a way of making the text mean what the scholar thinks it

²² For examples of discussions on the term, see Anne L. Klinck, "The Old English Elegy as a Genre," *English Studies in Canada* X.2 (1984) 129-40; Maria José Mora, "The Invention of the Old English Elegy," *English Studies* 2 (1995) 129-39.

²³ Faye Walker-Pelkey, "'Frige hwæt ic hatte': 'The Wife's Lament' as Riddle," *Papers on Language and Literature* 28.3 (1992) 242-66; Fredric Tupper, "The Cynewulfian Runes of the First Riddle," *Modern Language Notes* XXV.8 (1910) 235-41.

²⁴ For discussions of capitalisation see Burton Raffel, "Translating the Old English Elegies," *The Old English Elegies: New Essays in Criticism and Research* ed. Martin Green (London: Associated University Presses, 1983) 31-45; Frantzen *Desire* 178.

ought to mean. One of the most telling examples of the change emendations can make is the proposed alterations of the first lines of *Wife*. By the exchange of a few letters the narrator of the poem is made male instead of female.²⁵ The editor thus wields great power in determining the meaning of a poem. It has been stated that “editors ought not be reluctant to make emendations where the text clearly calls for them.”²⁶ The question is then how to decide when the text “clearly” calls for emendation, as well as who is qualified to make such a judgement. One emendation which has almost achieved the status of original text is the addition of a line to *Beowulf* where it seemed to the scholars of the time as if text was missing, since the two half-lines of line 390 did not alliterate.²⁷ The first change was made in 1857 with the inclusion of a new b-verse, followed by a new a-verse. Friedrich Klaeber chose a slightly different wording, and his change has now entered the canon.²⁸ In his translation Kevin Crossley-Holland, for example, has chosen not to mark the text as having been emended.²⁹ Similarly Seamus Heaney, in his translation of the poem, makes no distinction between the Old English text and Klaeber’s addition.³⁰ Michael Swanton, however, mentions in a footnote in his edition that lines 389b-390a have been added.³¹ George Jack’s student edition of the poem retains the unchanged text, but it is marked as if there existed a lacuna in the manuscript.³² It may be argued that Klaeber’s addition, *Pa to dura eode / widcuð hæleð* ‘then walked to the door / the famous hero’ does not change the meaning of the poem to any great extent, yet the question remains, just how much liberty may we take with a text? Is there a limit, and who is qualified to set it?

Another task for the editor is to decide whether an unfamiliar word in a text is a variant spelling of another word, or a *hapax legomenon*. Old English spelling was by no means unified, with scribes using variant spellings in the space of a few lines. The existence of a number of dialects also complicates matters, as a text sometimes gives the appearance of having existed in an older version in one dialect, and the extant copy having been written by a scribe unfamiliar with that dialect, thus making mistakes. In this context it is not easy to decide whether the word encountered is a new word or a misspelling. Such a word can be found in line 16 and 17 of *Wulf: Uncerne earne hwelp/ bireð wulf to wuda*.³³ The word *earne* does not exist anywhere else in the Old English corpus, and no one knows what it means. It is often assumed to be a variant spelling for *earmne* ‘weak,’ ‘cowardly,’ and one suggested translation is ‘our

²⁵ For propositions for these changes see, for example, Martin Stevens, “The Narrator of *The Wife’s Lament*,” *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 69 (1968) 72-90.

²⁶ Kenneth Sisam quoted by Stevens 78.

²⁷ Frantzen discusses how *Beowulf*, a rather short text when compared to a country’s whole literary output, has become the touchstone of Old English poetry, by which we decide whether a poem is written correctly or not, *Desire* 178.

²⁸ Frantzen *Desire* 182.

²⁹ Kevin Crossley-Holland, *Beowulf* (London: Macmillan, 1968) 42.

³⁰ Seamus Heaney, *Beowulf* (London: Faber, 1999) 14.

³¹ Michael Swanton, *Beowulf* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1978) 53.

³² George Jack, *Beowulf: A Student Edition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994) 51.

³³ Note in this context that there is dispute as to whether ‘wulf’ should be capitalised or not, that is, whether it refers to an animal or to a person.

poor whelp,' but there have also been suggestions that the word is *earn* 'eagle,' a common image in Old English poetry as a reference to death in battle.³⁴ Other examples of rare/misspelled words are *eorðscraef*, *eorðsele* and *herheard* in *Wife*. The last word also highlights the problem of division of words. It is written *her heard* on two different lines, but it is not uncommon for the Anglo-Saxon scribe to divide compounds that way, leaving the modern editor to decide whether it should be written as one word, as *her heard* 'this hard place' (or *heard* 'hard' referring back to the husband) or *herh eard* 'sacred place,' taking *herh* to be a variant spelling of *hearh*, 'har-row'.³⁵

Looking at the amount of mediation a text goes through before the scholar can lay claim to it for interpretation, one is faced with the question of how much change is acceptable. If the scholar claims to be looking for the "original text," then surely no alterations at all should be allowed. If we believe that the text on the manuscript page reflects the unspoiled original, any attempt at change would pollute the material. If we allow change we have to decide when a little change becomes too much. What can be certain is that we cannot assume that we have unmediated access to any "original" texts, and our interpretations must take that into account.

The canonical nature of Anglo-Saxon scholarship

The field of Anglo-Saxon studies appears, perhaps more than others, to invite an awed reverence towards authorities. Knowledge appears to be sacred if it is old and it is sometimes intimated that if one of the "experts" of the early days of research in the field has come down in favour of an interpretation, that interpretation cannot be questioned. Frantzen has argued that the field of Anglo-Saxon studies is ruled by a "guard," a "selecting authority," who decide what is and what is not a permissible reading.³⁶ When a student is in doubt, he or she will be referred to one of the great forebears, one of the guards, who has already made a judgement on this point, and the matter will be resolved, without any further research having to be done. There seems to exist a feeling, possibly rightly so, that scholars and students of today are not as well-read in the classics and not educated on as broad a scale as those writing at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. This may or may not be the case, yet the feeling that we are inferior to previous scholars should not stop us from examining their findings, or make us believe that we cannot find new ways of reading the material. Still, to question the findings of the accepted authorities is sometimes treated as tantamount to blasphemy.

When it comes to editions of texts, some editions will gain greater acceptance than others. In studying *Beowulf*, for example, the Klaeber version is often used, and

³⁴ Adams; Seiichi Suzuki, "Wulf and Eadwacer: A Reinterpretation and Some Conjectures," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 88.2 (1987) 175-85.

³⁵ The last interpretation is proposed by Karl Wentersdorf in "The Situation of the Narrator in the Old English *Wife's Lament*," *Speculum* 56.3 (1981) 492-516.

³⁶ Frantzen 125.

for *The Exeter Book* Krapp's and Dobbie's version in the *Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records* is one of the editions most referred to. It has, for example, been stated that "[e]xcept for several emendations ... the Krapp and Dobbie text may be taken as definitive."³⁷

These edited versions have over time come to acquire the status of "originals" themselves to many scholars. It is assumed that the knowledge and wisdom of those editors leaves nothing to add or question, so that the modern scholar can then immediately proceed to work on the contents of the text.³⁸ There exists a general unwillingness to question the received wisdom.³⁹

Dictionaries are regarded in a similar vein. Although research has shown, time and time again, that the dictionaries of J. R. Clark Hall and J. Bosworth and T. N. Toller suffer from mistakes and misreadings on the part of the compiler,⁴⁰ they are still referred to as the final point of any quandary: that is, if it says so in Bosworth-Toller, there is no need to take the research any further. Or, as Frantzen puts it "the glossary sometimes becomes the translator's gospel."⁴¹

A similar instance of the weight of the authorities is illustrated in a reading of *Wife*.⁴² In her interpretation, Elinor Lench argues that the Wife is dead, speaking from the grave, murdered by her husband. To explain why such an act should have been committed, Lench claims that the poem suggests accusations of adultery levelled at the Wife. Lench then proceeds by stating that adultery was routinely punished by death in Anglo-Saxon society.⁴³ As support for this statement, which flies in the face of studies of Anglo-Saxon laws and what can be gleaned about women's status from other texts, Lench quotes certain sections of Sharon Turner's *The History of the Anglo-Saxons from the Earliest Period to the Norman Conquest* (Philadelphia 1841), and

³⁷ Thomas M. Davis, "Another View of 'The Wife's Lament,'" *Papers on Language and Literature* 1 (1965) 291-305, 291 n. 2.

³⁸ This attitude resulted in an unusually obvious incident of circular reasoning on the Ansaxnet. In a discussion whether Scyld Scefing's funeral in *Beowulf* should be understood literally or symbolically, one scholar referred to a passage in Klaeber (122) where it is stated that the Scandinavians during the fourth to sixth centuries buried their dead at sea in ships. Klaeber's main authority in this matter is Knut Stjerna. Stjerna bases this assumption on *Beowulf*, specifically the passage on Scyld Scefing's funeral. Thus we know how to interpret a section of *Beowulf*, based on the evidence we find in the same section of *Beowulf*. AnsaxDat 10-11/09 1998 *Beowulf* [sic] funeral.

³⁹ This may be in the process of changing, but it is a difficult process. The incident mentioned in the preceding footnote generated a much-participated-in debate on the Ansaxnet, where it was evident that scholars are indeed aware of the shortcomings of Klaeber and other interpreters of Old English texts. At the same time they argued for the continued use of those editions, partly because of nostalgia, partly because the groundwork laid down and the general learning of the people involved was simply unparalleled and could not be reproduced by any later scholar. This debate mainly concerned the teaching of undergraduates, where there seemed to exist a general consensus that students do not need absolute accuracy, as long as they familiarise themselves with the text. No mention was made of the possibility of certain attitudes, based on mistaken research, being introduced to students not equipped with the knowledge and information to question them, and what outcome this might have. Work has begun, however, to produce a revised version of Klaeber's edition.

⁴⁰ See, for example, Peter Baker; Julie Coleman, "Sexual Euphemism in Old English," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 93.1 (1992) 93-98; E. G. Stanley, "Wolf, My Wolf!" *Old English and New: Studies in Language and Linguistics in Honor of Frederick G. Cassidy* ed Joan H. Hall, Nick Doane and Dick Ringler (New York: Garland Publishing, 1992) 46-62.

⁴¹ Frantzen *Desire* 172.

⁴² Elinor Lench, "The Wife's Lament: A Poem of the Living Dead," *Comitatus* 1 (1970) 3-23.

⁴³ Lench 15.

John Thrupp's *The Anglo-Saxon Home: A History of the Domestic Institutions and Customs of England, from the Fifth to the Eleventh Century* (London 1862). Lench's assumptions on the state of the narrator and the reason behind it have been reiterated by Raymond Tripp Jr. and William C. Johnson, none of whom seems to have looked at Turner and Thrupp directly. In fact, the sections of Turner and Thrupp that Lench refers to do not mention Anglo-Saxon punishment for female adultery. Instead both Turner and Thrupp refer to Boniface's letter to Æthelbald of Mercia, in which Boniface describes the customs of Saxon tribes of the past, where adulterous women were treated very brutally.⁴⁴ Neither Thrupp nor Turner claims that those were the customs of the Anglo-Saxons. Yet, their names alone lend credence to the suggestions of Lench, and so the idea of wife-murdering Anglo-Saxons is perpetuated.⁴⁵

The poems

In order to appreciate the rich diversity of the scholarship on *Wife* and *Wulf*, it is necessary to understand the complexities of the poems that engender this diversity. In the following section I will try and show this complexity. This is not the place to try and solve the cruxes of texts, an enterprise I believe is doomed to fail, anyway. What I will do instead, is to go through the poems, pointing out the sites of contention, the instances where uncertainty is created, and list some of the different interpretations that have been offered. It is not my place here to privilege one reading over another. The interpretations are only offered as an illustration of the wide range of possible explanations.

In order to follow my discussion of the texts I refer to the printed poems in the Appendix. The poems, as well as all quotations in the text are from the *Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records*.

Both poems are to be found in a manuscript of *The Exeter Book*, which was bequeathed to Exeter cathedral by Leofric, the first bishop of Exeter, in 1046.⁴⁶ He died in 1072, and it is assumed that the manuscript was written some 70 years before his death. The dates of composition, however, are not known. As well as religious poetry the book also contains secular poetry, and some scholars have queried why it was included in the collection of a cathedral. It has been postulated that the reason for this inclusion is not that Leofric was particularly interested in poetry but that a large proportion of the texts are of a religious nature, such as *Juliana*, *The Judgement Day* and *The Lords Prayer I*, and that the first text of the manuscript is *Christ*.⁴⁷ More than half of the manuscript is concerned with either religious texts, or texts of a philosophical or contemplative nature. *Wulf* and *Wife*, however, are placed further back in the

⁴⁴ Dorothy Whitelock ed., *English Historical Documents c. 500-1042* (1955; London: Eyre Methuen, 1979) 819.

⁴⁵ For a more in-depth investigation of Lench's sources, see Berit Åström, "Murdering the Narrator of *The Wife's Lament*," *Medieval Feminist Newsletter* 27.1 (1999) 24-27.

⁴⁶ Thorpe iii.

⁴⁷ George Krapp and Elliott van Kirk Dobbie ed., *The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records III: The Exeter Book* (1936; New York: Columbia University Press, , 1966). The titles are editorial.

manuscript and flank the first of two collections of riddles.⁴⁸ These riddles concern mundane topics, where, for example, an inkwell or a shirt is presenting itself. Some of the riddles are on sexual matters and have been considered “obscene” in nature. Whether their inclusion into the manuscript was accidental, subversive or done on purpose is impossible to say. It is interesting to note that to Benjamin Thorpe, the first editor of *The Exeter Book*, it is precisely the secular texts that are of any value to readers other than philologists. He commends the secular poems like *The Wanderer* and *Deor* for their originality, dismisses some of the religious texts as mere translations from Latin, and claims that *Juliana* “beyond its philological value, which is considerable, has little to claim our attention.”⁴⁹ Thorpe laments the fact that so much of the latter half of the manuscript has been damaged and wishes that all damage would have been confined to the first half of the manuscript, which to him is dispensable.⁵⁰

I stated that *Wulf* precedes the first collection of riddles. In fact, some scholars have argued that *Wulf* is not a poem, but a riddle, and that it should not be given the title it is usually known by. In literary studies it is a commonplace that the expectations of the scholar will influence the reading of a text, and, in the case of Old English studies, these expectations will also affect the title attributed to it. In the case of *Wife* and *Wulf* this becomes even more apparent. What genre they should be assigned to has been and is still open to debate. They both have a riddle-like quality and they were for a long time read as riddles. The fact that they also seem to possess elegiac features has caused many scholars to group them together with, for instance, *The Wanderer*, *The Seafarer* and *The Ruin* as a genre of Old English elegies. As I stated earlier, this label has been contested on the grounds that they are elegies neither in a classical sense, nor in a Romantic sense. It is, however, the term most often used by scholars discussing the poems.

Wulf and Eadwacer

The poem referred to as *Wulf and Eadwacer* is found on fol. 100b-101a of the manuscript, directly before of the first group of riddles. When Benjamin Thorpe printed the poem in 1842 he presented it as a riddle, but did not suggest any solution. Later it was believed that the riddle was composed by Cynewulf, and this led to the assumption that all the riddles in the manuscript were written by Cynewulf. In 1888, however, Henry Bradley suggested that the poem was not a riddle but a “‘fragment of a dramatic soliloquy,’ in which a woman laments her separation from her lover.”⁵¹ Bradley introduced the notion of three characters: the woman; Wulf, who is her lover; and

⁴⁸ The manuscript was entered in the catalogue of the cathedral as *l. mycel englisc boc be gehwilcum þingum on leod-wisan gepoht* ‘one great English book about various things, composed in verse.’ Thorpe iii.

⁴⁹ Thorpe vii.

⁵⁰ Thorpe x.

⁵¹ *ASPR* lv.

Eadwacer, her “tyrant husband.”⁵² Nevertheless, Frederick Tupper later published an article reading the text as a riddle,⁵³ and as late as 1923 there were still suggestions that the text should be interpreted as a riddle.⁵⁴ The qualities of the text that have allowed it to be read as a riddle are its brevity, abrupt beginning, oblique references to people and places, and also its place in the manuscript, preceding a number of riddles. In later years, however, the consensus seems to be that the text should be interpreted as a poem rather than a riddle.

Assuming the text to be a poem, three major identifications were proposed in the early years of the twentieth century: the story of Signy and Sigmund from the *Volsungasaga*, the Wolddietrich B story and the Odoaker legend. Of these only the connection with the *Volsungasaga* seems to have survived.⁵⁵

These identifications were occasioned by the fact that the poem is so short, only 19 lines. Many scholars assumed that the only reason for it being so short was that it was either a fragment of a longer poem now lost, or a short piece elaborating a particular incident in a well-known story cycle.

It is precisely the shortness of the poem and the fact that we do not know who its characters are that has made it so difficult to interpret. The uncertainty begins in the first line where it is stated that ‘it is to my people as if someone gave them a *lac*.’⁵⁶ What *lac* means is hotly contested. It has been variously interpreted as battle, sacrifice, gift, message or game.⁵⁷ The next line is equally troublesome,⁵⁸ since both the expression *aþecgan* and *on þreat* have obscure meanings.⁵⁹ Perhaps the complexity of the line is best shown by Arnold Davidson’s translation: “will they (receive/consume/oppress/relieve) him if he comes (with a host/in violence/in need)?”⁶⁰ The line has also been read as a statement rather than a question, that is, ‘they will receive/oppress etc. him if he comes ...’

The following line is the first in what seems to be a refrain, stating that ‘it is different for us.’⁶¹ It has also been suggested that the line should be read ‘we are too

⁵² *ASPR*. lvi.

⁵³ Frederick Tupper, “The Cynewulfian Runes of the First Riddle,” *Modern Language Notes* XXV.8 (1910) 235-41.

⁵⁴ H. Patzig, “Zum ersten Rätsel des Exeterbuchs,” *Archiv für das Studium der neuen Sprachen und Literaturen* CXLV (1923) 204-07.

⁵⁵ See, for example, Richard North, “Metre and Meaning in *Wulf and Eadwacer*: Signy Reconsidered,” *Loyal Letters: Studies on Mediaeval Alliterative Poetry & Prose* ed. L. A. J. R. Houwen and A. A. MacDonald (Groningen: Forsten, 1994) 29-54; Carole A. Hough, “*Wulf and Eadwacer*: a Note on Ungelic,” *ANQ* 8.3 (1995) 3-6.

⁵⁶ *Leodum is minum swylce him mon lac gife*;

⁵⁷ See, for instance, Wesley S. Mattox, “Encirclement and Sacrifice in *Wulf and Eadwacer*,” *Annuaire Mediaevale* 16 (1975) 33-40. He reads *lac* as ‘sacrifice’.

⁵⁸ *willað hy hine aþecgan, gif he on þreat cymeð*

⁵⁹ For opposing readings of *aþecgan* see, for example, Peter Baker’s “The Ambiguity of *Wulf and Eadwacer*, where he claims that the word means ‘to feed’ or ‘to kill’ and Fiona and Richard Gameson’s “*Wulf and Eadwacer, The Wife’s Lament* and the Discovery of the Individual in Old English Verse,” *Studies in Language and Literature: “Doubt Wisely:” Papers in Honour of E. G. Stanley* ed. M. J. Toswell and E. M. Tyler (1996) 457-74 where they refute the argument that the word may mean ‘to kill’.

⁶⁰ Arnold Davidson, “Interpreting *Wulf and Eadwacer*,” *Annuaire Mediaevale* 16 (1975) 24-32, 25.

⁶¹ *Ungelic is us*.

much alike', seeing it as a reference to the *Volsungasaga* and the incestuous relationship between Signy and her brother.⁶²

The poem continues with a statement that Wulf is on one island and the narrator on another.⁶³ I write Wulf with a capital 'w', but not all scholars see the word as a name; instead they suggest that it is a reference to the animal wolf.⁶⁴ Others have claimed that it is a reference to the character being an outlaw. This has been disputed, however, on the grounds that there is no evidence that the Anglo-Saxons referred to outlaws as wolves.⁶⁵

Line 9 contains a *hapax legomenon*. The narrator claims that she *dogode* with her thoughts the wanderings of Wulf.⁶⁶ What this word means is uncertain. It has been emended to *hogode* 'thought about'; suggestions have been made that it is related to *docga* and as such should be seen as a forerunner of 'dogged'⁶⁷ and it has been claimed that it should be interpreted as 'availed'.⁶⁸

In lines 10-12 the narrator explains that 'when it was raining, and I sat weeping, the one bold in battle *bogum bilegde* me and it was a pleasure to me but also hateful.'⁶⁹ The inflection of 'I sat weeping' *ic reotugu sæt* (l.10) is what convinces scholars that the narrator is female. Unlike the discussions on *Wife*, there has not been any debate as to the sex of the narrator. The question is instead whether it is a human female or whether she is a wolf⁷⁰ or a dog.⁷¹ What exactly *bogum bilegde* refers to is uncertain. Most often it is interpreted as an image of an embrace or a sexual encounter. However, since *bog* in most cases in Old English poetry is used only for animals' forelegs it has been suggested that it is an indication of rape,⁷² or that it is a reference to all the protagonists being wolves.⁷³ Other scholars have suggested that the word is a reference to boughs and that these boughs should be interpreted as restraints,⁷⁴ or re-

⁶² Hough "Wulf and Eadwacer."

⁶³ *Wulf is on iege, ic on oþerre.*

⁶⁴ Peter R. Orton, "An Approach to *Wulf and Eadwacer*," *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 85 (1985) 223-58.

⁶⁵ Stanley, "Wolf, My Wolf!"

⁶⁶ *Wulfes ic mines widlastum wenum dogode;*

⁶⁷ Anne L. Klinck, "Animal Imagery in *Wulf and Eadwacer* and the Possibilities of Interpretation," *Papers on Language and Literature* 23.1 (1987) 3-13.

⁶⁸ North 39.

⁶⁹ *þonne hit wæs renig weder ond ic reotugu sæt,
þonne mec se beaducafa bogum bilegde,
wæs me wyn to þon, wæs me hwæpre eac lað.*

⁷⁰ Orton "An Approach."

⁷¹ W. J. Sedgfield, "Old English Notes: *Wulf and Eadwacer*," *Modern Language Review* 36 (1931) 74-75.

⁷² James E. Anderson, "Deor, *Wulf and Eadwacer* and *The Soul's Address*: How and Where the Old English Exeter Book Riddles Begin," *The Old English Elegies: New Essays in Criticism and Research* ed. Martin Green (London: Associated University Presses, 1983) 204-30.

⁷³ Orton "An Approach."

⁷⁴ Marijane Osborn, "The Text and Context of *Wulf and Eadwacer*," *The Old English Elegies: New Essays in Criticism and Research* ed. Martin Green (London: Associated University Presses, 1983) 174-89.

fer to a fortress built for protection.⁷⁵ The expression has also been read as a reference to the Norse image of a warrior as a tree of battle,⁷⁶ and it has also been pointed out that the word *bog* can mean ‘offspring’ or ‘progeny.’⁷⁷ For those who see the expression *bogum bilegde* as an embrace the need arises to explain why the narrator experiences it as both joyful and hateful. An early suggestion was that the narrator is being “coy.”⁷⁸ Some have argued that the narrator is enjoying the physical side of a sexual encounter, but still longing for her “true love.” When the phrase is interpreted as rape it is claimed that the joy stems from a pregnancy resulting from the rape.⁷⁹ It has also been suggested that the embrace is imagined, and therefore hateful, since it is only a dream that must come to an end.⁸⁰

In lines 13-15 the narrator appears to cry out directly to the absent Wulf, claiming that it is the thought of his rare visits, possibly litotes for no visits at all, and a sorrowing mind, that are making her ill, not the lack of food.⁸¹ The phrase *nales meteliste* ‘not at all lack of food’ has also been interpreted as ‘no lack of meat,’ which has been taken to mean that there is a presence of meat in the narrator; she is pregnant but despite her pregnancy her illness is not caused by morning sickness but by her worries. The idea of pregnancy has also been brought up in conjunction with the *Volsungasaga*, suggesting that Signy, as the narrator, feels ill thinking of her pregnancy by her brother, and knowing that her child will grow up to be a fratricide.⁸²

After this call to the absent Wulf, the narrator appears to turn to another character, Eadwacer, in lines 16 and 17, asking whether he is listening. She states that a *wulf* is carrying their *earne* whelp to the forest.⁸³ Just who Eadwacer is, is uncertain. Some have argued that he is the husband of the narrator. It has also been claimed that it is the name of the whelp, and that the utterance should read “Do you hear Eadwacer?” and is aimed at Wulf.⁸⁴ Another claim is that *eadwacer* is not a name at all, but an ironic epithet given to Wulf.⁸⁵ Who or what the whelp is, is uncertain. Most scholars assume that it is an ironic epithet for the offspring of the narrator and Wulf. A connection has been drawn between the alleged outlaw status of Wulf and this child, which would explain why it is called a cub or a whelp.⁸⁶ It has been pointed out,

⁷⁵ Alexandra Hennessey Olsen, “Old English Women, Old English Men: A Reconsideration of ‘Minor’ Characters,” *Old English Shorter Poems: Basic Readings* ed. Katherine O’Brien O’Keeffe (New York: Garland, 1994) 65-83.

⁷⁶ North 42.

⁷⁷ A. C. Bouman, “*Leodum is Minum*: Beadohild’s Complaint,” *Neophilologus* 33 (1949) 103-113, 111.

⁷⁸ Sedgfield 74.

⁷⁹ Anderson 208.

⁸⁰ Sedgfield 75; Richard F. Giles, “‘Wulf and Eadwacer’: A New Reading,” *Neophilologus* 65 (1981) 468-72.

⁸¹ *Wulf, min Wulf, wena me pine
seoce gedydon, pine seldcymas,
murnende mod, nales meteliste.*

⁸² North 46.

⁸³ *Gehyrest þu, Eadwacer? Uncerne earne hwelp/ bireþ wulf to wuda.*

⁸⁴ Orton “An Approach” 232-33.

⁸⁵ John Adams, “‘Wulf and Eadwacer’: An Interpretation,” *Modern Language Notes* LXXIII.1 (1958) 1-5.

⁸⁶ Phillip Pulsiano and Kirsten Wolf, “The ‘Hwelp’ in *Wulf and Eadwacer*,” *English Language Notes* XXVIII.3 (1991) 1-9.

however, that this seems to be stretching the use of metaphor a bit too far.⁸⁷ The word *earne*, a word that has not been found anywhere else, has variously been emended to *eargne* ‘cowardly,’ *earone* ‘swift’ or *earmne* ‘wretched’.⁸⁸ It has also been suggested that the grammar has been misread and that the line should be interpreted as an eagle carrying the whelp to the woods, that is, the whelp will fall in battle and will be eaten by the eagle, one of the Anglo-Saxon beasts of battle.⁸⁹

The last two lines are as puzzling as the rest of the poem. The narrator seems to state that ‘that is easily torn asunder which was never joined, our song together.’⁹⁰ This has been interpreted as a reference to an adulterous relationship, that Wulf and the narrator were illicit lovers. The use of the word *tosliteð* has also been cross-referenced to a line in Maxims where it is claimed that an outlaw will run with the wolves, but they often tear him to pieces. It has also been claimed that it is a reference to the marriage ceremony outlined in the Bible: what God has joined man may not separate.⁹¹

From this brief overview we see that almost all of this poem is open to debate. There is no consensus as to the status of the narrator: is she a prisoner amongst a foreign people, or is she residing with her own people? Who or what is the gift they may receive? What will they do to him if he comes? Who *are* “they?” How is he coming, with a troop or a threat? There may be two or three principal characters in the poem, and the woman may be married to either of the alleged men, or she may not be married at all. She may be enjoying sexual relations with one or more men, or she may be the subject of cruel rape. The poem leaves many different openings, which is why it is so fascinating to read. As we shall see, *Wife* is not quite as free with its meaning, but this text also refuses to be pinned down.

The Wife’s Lament

The Wife’s Lament is to be found on fol. 115a-115b in the *Exeter Book*. It has sometimes been read as connected with the poem *The Husband’s Message*, which appears to be a reassuring message from a man to his wife or lover that their separation is over and that she should hurry to him.⁹² This interpretation, however, seems to have become less prevalent amongst scholars in recent years.

Uncertainties in the translation begin with the first word of the first line, *Ic*. The ‘I’ of the story is not named, and scholars have debated whether it is a man or a woman speaking. When Benjamin Thorpe published the first translation of the poem he gave it the title *The Exile’s Complaint*.⁹³ As early as the 1850s, however, it had

⁸⁷ Orton “An Approach” 233.

⁸⁸ Orton “An Approach” 231-32.

⁸⁹ Suzuki, “Wulf and Eadwacer: A Reinterpretation and Some Conjectures.”

⁹⁰ *Þæt mon eape tosliteð þætte næfre gesomnad wæs, / uncer giedd geador.*

⁹¹ James B. Spamer, “The Marriage Concept in Wulf and Eadwacer,” *Neophilologus* 62 (1978) 143-44.

⁹² ASPR lvii.

⁹³ Thorpe, *Codex Exoniensis* 441-44.

become known as *The Wife's Lament*. However, not all scholars have agreed with this title. The question of the sex of the narrator has been brought up again and again, and although consensus seems to have been reached at present that the narrator is female, a case was made as late as 1987 for a male narrator.⁹⁴ The reasons given for a female narrator are the words *geomorre* (l. 1), and *minre sylfre* (l. 2). These are inflected in the feminine, and those who advocate a female narrator claim that they refer to her. Those who believe the narrator to be male argue instead for scribal error,⁹⁵ or that the words are inflected according to grammatical, rather than natural, gender.⁹⁶ L. L. Schücking at one point suggested that the two first lines were a later addition and that the poem really began with *Hwæt*, (l. 3).⁹⁷ This would allow an interpretation where the poem is narrated by a man. However, Schücking later changed his opinion to a female narrator.⁹⁸

As stated above, the consensus favours a female narrator, and I concur with this consensus. My reasons for this are, of course, as biased as every other scholar's. When I first encountered the poem it was presented to me as narrated by a woman. This appealed to me for a number of reasons, not all of them academic, and I have not yet encountered any arguments to the contrary strong enough to persuade me to interpret it otherwise. For the purposes of this thesis I will therefore refer to the narrator as female.

In the first five lines the narrator states that 'she will tell her own story,' about a life in which she has previously known misery, but now it is worse than ever. These lines are regarded by most scholars as a conventional opening like that of *The Seafarer*, but it has also been pointed out that the opening resembles those of the riddles.⁹⁹

In the next section the narrator tells us that her lord departed over the waves and that she was worried since she did not know where he was (ll. 9-11). This journey over the waves has been interpreted as the death of the lord¹⁰⁰ as well as a simple journey into a different country.

The narrator herself then set out in search of *folgab* (ll. 11-12). Her lord's kinsmen began to plot with secret thoughts to separate them so that they would live hatefully apart 'and I was filled with longing' (ll. 11-14). The order of events in this section has been much discussed. Line six, informing us that the lord departed, begins with *Ærest*, whereas line nine explaining the woman's own departure begins with *Ða*. These words are generally taken to mean 'first' and 'then,' suggesting a straightfor-

⁹⁴ Rudolph C. Bambas, "Another View of the Old English *Wife's Lament*," *Journal of English and German Philology* 62 (1963) 303-09; Martin Stevens, "The Narrator of *The Wife's Lament*," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 69 (1968) 72-90; Jerome Mandel, "The *Wife's Lament*," *Alternative Readings in Poetry* (New York: Peter Lang, 1987) 149-81.

⁹⁵ Bambas.

⁹⁶ Stevens and Mandel.

⁹⁷ L. L. Schücking, "Das Angelsächsische Gedicht von der 'Klage der Frau,'" *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum* XLVIII (1907) 436-449, 447.

⁹⁸ *ASPR* lviii.

⁹⁹ Faye Walker-Pelkey, "'Frige hwæt ic hatte': 'The Wife's Lament' as Riddle" 246.

¹⁰⁰ Raymond P. Tripp, "The Narrator as Revenant: A Reconsideration of Three Old English Elegies," *Papers in Language and Literature* 8 (1972) 339-61.

ward chronology of events: first the lord departed, then the narrator, and after that his kinsmen began to conspire against them. It has been suggested, however, that the words should not be interpreted that way in this poem, but rather as if the chronology is moving back and forth, in imitation of a troubled mind.¹⁰¹ The nature of the conspiracy is not revealed in the text, but suggestions have included accusations of adultery¹⁰² or witchcraft.¹⁰³

The word *folgað* has generated a lot of debate. Usually taken to mean ‘service,’ such as that owed by a retainer to his lord, scholars have been discussing whether an Anglo-Saxon woman would travel alone in search of that kind of service. An alternative explanation is that it refers to protection or sanctuary, and that it denotes the dwelling place of the narrator.¹⁰⁴

In the next section it is stated that the narrator was commanded by her lord to take up *herheard*, and she explains that she has few or no friends in the land (ll.15-17). *Herheard* has generated differing suggested readings. Written on two different lines, most scholars still see the word as a compound. Thorpe read it as the name of the narrator’s lord.¹⁰⁵ Later scholars have suggested that it means a hard place, referring to the *eorðsele* where the narrator lives. Others have suggested that it should be read as two words, *heard* referring back to the ‘harsh’ lord and *her* ‘here’ referring to her dwelling place. Another suggested division has been *hearh eard* ‘harrow yard’, taken to mean a pagan sanctuary.¹⁰⁶ It has also been suggested that the lord’s command that she take up a ‘hard place’ is actually a command to have her killed and buried.¹⁰⁷

The next lines have been divided differently by different editors. Some place a full stop after the words *bliþe gebæro* (l.21)¹⁰⁸ whereas others place it after *morþor hycgendne* (l. 20).¹⁰⁹ Where the full stop is placed influences the reading to a great extent. Beginning with line 17 the narrator states that her mind is sad because she found that the man she thought well suited to her was sad of mind and ‘contemplating a crime,’ *morþor hycgendne* (l. 20). If the full stop is placed in the middle of the next line, the lord is ‘contemplating crime with a cheerful demeanour.’¹¹⁰ This would sug-

¹⁰¹ Lee Ann Johnson, “The Narrative Structure of ‘The Wife’s Lament,’” *English Studies* 52 (1971) 497-501.

¹⁰² Douglas D. Short, “The Old English *Wife’s Lament*: An Interpretation,” *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 71 (1970) 585-603.

¹⁰³ Davis, “Another View.”

¹⁰⁴ Wentersdorf, “The Situation.”

¹⁰⁵ Thorpe 442.

¹⁰⁶ Wentersdorf.

¹⁰⁷ Lench “*The Wife’s Lament*: A Poem of the Living Dead.”

¹⁰⁸ See, for example, Bruce Mitchell’s and Fred C. Robinson’s *A Guide to Old English* 5th edition (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992) 266.

¹⁰⁹ See, for instance, *ASPR* 210.

¹¹⁰ *Forþon is min hyge geomor,*

ða ic me ful gemæcne monnan funde,

heardsælgne, hygegeomorne

mod miþendne, morþor hycgendne

bliþe gebæro ful oft wit beotedan

þæt unc ne gedælde nemne deað ana

owiht elles; ll. 17b-23a

gest that he is untrustworthy and that the narrator is disappointed in him. If, however, it is placed at the end of line 20, the implication might be that he keeps his troubles to himself like a man should;¹¹¹ the following line then states that the lord and the narrator often promised each other, with cheerful demeanour, that nothing apart from death would separate them, but that that promise now has been overturned and their friendship is now as if it had never existed (ll. 21-25). Needless to say this makes a substantial difference to the interpretation of the relationship between the narrator and her lord. The relationship also comes into focus in the reading of the next two lines. There the narrator observes that she must suffer, near or far, the *fæhðu* of her 'very dear one'. The word *fæhð* 'hostility', 'enmity', 'vendetta' proves important in discerning what kind of relationship the narrator has with her lord. Is she suffering the enmity of others because of her lord, or is her lord feeling hostility towards her? Scholars have argued for both readings. Other critics maintain that *fæhðu* is a highly specialised word that would only relate to feuds between different families or tribal groups, and would not have been used for strife between spouses, and that it is therefore unlikely that the poem is concerned with a woman's longing for her lord. An emendation has been suggested, from *fæhðu* to *fæðm* 'embrace'. This would naturally give a more romantic slant to lines 25-26.¹¹²

In the following section the narrator refers back to the command of line 15, describing how she was commanded to dwell in a grove in an underground cave, *eorðscraef*, under an oak. She describes the cave and its dreary surroundings and how she is seized by longing. She also contrasts her lonely pacing in the cave with *frynd* who 'live in love and share a bed;' how she must sit alone and 'lament her fate' (ll. 27-41). There have been differing opinions about the *frynd* who share a bed, whether they are lovers, friends or kinsmen. It has also been suggested that they are not 'loved ones living' *leofe lifgende* but actually the dead kinsmen of the narrator.¹¹³ How to interpret the place where the narrator is staying is also a crux. It has been pointed out that when the word *eorðscraef* is used in other texts it refers to a tomb.¹¹⁴ One interpretation has been a system of underground caves.¹¹⁵ Other suggestions have included a ruined fortified town, like the one described in the poem *The Ruin*. Another question that has also turned out to be a problem for some scholars is why a woman would live on her own outside any family group and where she would find food.¹¹⁶

The final lines, 42-53 are perhaps the most controversial of the poem. They have been interpreted as a curse, as a gnomic observation or as a lamentation on the fate of the narrator's lord. The *geong mon* of line 42 has been variously interpreted as either the narrator's lord, people in general including the narrator¹¹⁷ or as a third party who has intervened to separate the husband and her lord.

¹¹¹ See, for example, the sentiment expressed in *The Wanderer* ll. 70-73.

¹¹² Thomas Rountree, "The Wife's Lament 25b-26," *Explicator* 29 Item 24 (1970).

¹¹³ Thorpe; Johnson; Tripp.

¹¹⁴ Lench.

¹¹⁵ Wentersdorf.

¹¹⁶ Lench.

¹¹⁷ See Christine Fell's discussion of the use of *man* as a general noun for both sexes. *Women in Anglo-Saxon England and the Impact of 1066* (London: British Museum Publications, 1984).

I have referred to the narrator's lord throughout my discussion of the poem. He is called *hlaford* 'lord' (ll. 6, 15) and *leodfruma* 'leader of men' (l. 8) in the poem. That the poet chooses to use these formal terms some scholars have construed as evidence that the relationship is not between husband and wife, but between lord and retainer. Others have pointed to the fact that according to Anglo-Saxon law and custom a wife is subjugated to her husband as a retainer is to his lord. Against the formalities of those terms and the use of words like *folgaf* and *fæhðu* stands the fact that the lord is also referred to as *mines felaleofan* 'of my very dear one' (l. 26) and that their relationship is described as *freondscipe uncer* 'the friendship of us two' (l. 25).¹¹⁸ Likewise the use of the word *gemæcne* (l. 18) suggests that it is a question of a husband and wife. The word *mæcca* is used about one half from a pair or about husband and wife so in this poem it seems likely that the man suited to the narrator was suited in a conjugal sense. It has been suggested that the use of words like *hlaford* and *leodfruma* is a deliberate inclusion to highlight the poignancy of the woman's situation.¹¹⁹ Whether the narrator and her lord were married or not, we are still left with the question of whether they parted amicably or not. The nature of their parting influences the reading of the final section of the poem. If the lord commanded the narrator to live in a cave as punishment for real or imagined transgressions it is likely that the final section is a curse, where the narrator hopes that the lord will have to hide his sorrows behind a cheerful face and that he will find himself in a cold and dreary place surrounded by water, dreaming of better days. If, on the other hand, the two of them were separated by outside forces, but still in love, the end could be read as an exhortation to make the best of a difficult situation and a lament over the, possibly imagined, hardships her husband is going through. No matter what the interpretation, the poem ends with what seems to be an exclamation: 'Woe be to the one who must wait in longing for love.'¹²⁰

Looking at the differing interpretations of the poem we see that even though it does not invite quite as great a variety of readings as *Wulf* (for example, there is only one suggestion that the narrator is not, nor has ever been, a human¹²¹), it is still open to many different opinions and interpretations, and thus gives ample opportunity for the desire of the critic to influence the work carried out on it. The main points of disagreement are the sex of the narrator, her relationship to her lord, her vital status and the nature of her dwelling place.

In this chapter I have not provided an exhaustive analysis of cruces within the poems and all the differing interpretations and translations they have generated, but I have tried to show that reading and interpreting these poems is not a case of straightforward, literal translation, but a constant negotiation and selection between external

¹¹⁸ For the meaning of the use of the dual in Old English poetry see E. G. Stanley, "Paradise Lost of the Old English Dual," *The Endless Knot: Essays on Old and Middle English in Honor of Marie Borroff* ed. M. T. Tavormina & R. F. Yeager (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1995) 1-27.

¹¹⁹ Anne L. Klinck, "Lyric Voice and the Feminine in Some Ancient and Mediaeval *Frauenlieder*," *Florilegium* 13 (1994) 13-36.

¹²⁰ *Wa bið þam þe sceal*

of langope leofes abidan.

¹²¹ Faye Walker-Pelkey has suggested that the narrator is a speaking sword.

and internal sources, as well as a choice among more or less obscure words. The difficulties inherent in these poems, and the choices they necessitate, are reasons why they are such good tools for tracing the different attitudes, approaches and allegiances amongst Anglo-Saxonists.

Chapter Three: Identity Construction

In chapter one I discussed how individuals create their identities. In this chapter I discuss the ways in which Anglo-Saxonists as a group position themselves within the field of Old English studies and how they project a “professional identity” through strategies of inclusion and exclusion. Anglo-Saxonists comprise as heterogeneous a group of scholars as within any other field of research and their identities, like those of other people, are not unified entities, but a multiple network grounded in varying experiences; their identities are constructed on the bases of nationality, gender and ethnic affiliations, as well as other factors of influence such as religion, class, age and parenthood.¹ It is thus safe to say that no Anglo-Saxonist’s identity construction is identical to that of another. In this thesis, however, I focus on the construction of professional identities through the use of ideas of religion, nationality and a cultural heritage.

Professional identities within Old English studies

Many Anglo-Saxonists express a personal relationship with the period they study. In a discussion of the private ownership of archaeological material, Joseph Carroll compares such artefacts to religious relics, allowing him to experience a personal connectedness with the Anglo-Saxon people.² Other scholars express similar sentiments: how they feel a special closeness to the people of the Anglo-Saxon era. It seems as if they construct their personal identities partly through a relationship with the Anglo-Saxons. This personal relationship, however, is not expressed in published material. What I am looking at in this thesis is the constructed identity that the Anglo-Saxonists project in a professional context: the affiliations and alliances that they express in the public forum of publication. In the introduction I mentioned the tradition of Old English studies and how it shapes the research undertaken. This tradition also provides a framework within which the affiliations and alliances are sought. They go to make up a professional identity that is produced through publication or on the podium at a conference.

Within this framework of tradition, there are two separate spheres within which the scholar creates a professional identity: that of a Roman or a Germanic heritage. Speaking of *a* Roman heritage is misleading, however, since the heritage is not unified, but falls roughly into three parts. There is the Roman heritage of the pre-Anglo-Saxon period, manifesting itself in traditions of the Romano-British society that lived

¹ For a discussion of motherhood as an impetus for interpretation, see Chapter 9 of Mary Dockray-Miller’s doctoral thesis “Mixed Pairs: Gender Construction in Anglo-Saxon Art and Poetry,” diss., Loyola University, Chicago, 1996.

² See AnsaxDat 14/2 2002, under the heading “Is this legit?/Private Ownership of Artifacts.” See also a reply by Benjamin Slade, same date, under the heading “Private Ownership of Artifacts.”

on in Anglo-Saxon society,³ as well as in the contacts between Romans and Germanic tribes before the latter settled in Britain. There is also the Roman-Catholic heritage coupling Christian doctrine with classical literature mediated through patristic writings.⁴ The third part of the heritage comprises the use of the classical schooling of later academics, who apply their expectations to Old English literature, re-imagining, for example, *Beowulf* as an epic on the model of the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid*. The Anglo-Saxon society imagined within this sphere is populated by a philosophical, clerical, learned, Christian people, eschewing worldly pleasures for the rewards of heaven.

The affiliation with a Germanic heritage on the other hand posits Anglo-Saxon society along the lines of Tacitus' *Germania*, as a society mainly martial in its outlook, simple and straightforward, defined by ideals of honesty, loyalty and truth, or as Roberta Frank phrases it:

[t]o some extent we still share with Tacitus an idealized vision of the Germanic past, of a northern frontier brimming with simple, loyal, brave, proud and warlike pagans, men who were everything the materialistic, intellectual, cosmopolitan Romans were not.⁵

Inside the Roman and Germanic spheres, there are other aspects which the critic may use for affiliation: nationalism, religion, culture, continuity and alterity. Nationalism has been a part of the field of Old English research from its inception in the sixteenth century. Through the interpretation of Old English texts, scholars of each period have explored and expressed ideas about themselves, the society in which they live and the nation they belong to. The project has been described as being "to explore, define, and propagate fundamental ideas about what made the English 'English,'" and as an extension of that, "what made the Americans 'American.'"⁶ Timothy Brennan has pointed out that nationalism informs all contemporary literary criticism, a fact we must take into account, but which is "rarely expressed openly."⁷ Within Old English studies, nationalism also forms a part of scholars' identity work, where critics, for example place themselves in a context where the Anglo-Saxons are referred to as "we." It is rare, however, that a scholar expresses his or her ideas of nationalism. Instead, accusations of nationalist affiliations have become a tool to be employed in political negotiations, as we will see. Critics outside Old English studies project nation-

³ Exemplified, for example, in the use of the manor as an economic base. Arguments have been made, however, that the manor, although employed and developed by the Romans in Britain, is in fact a Celtic invention. See for instance, Eric John, *Reassessing Anglo-Saxon England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996).

⁴ This view of Roman heritage is exemplified by the *Fontes Anglo-Saxonici*-project, which attempts to find and list all the direct or indirect Latin sources for Old English writings and thought.

⁵ Roberta Frank, "Germanic Legend in Old English Literature," *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature* ed. Malcolm Godden and Michael Lapidge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991): 88-106, 104.

⁶ Frantzen *Desire* 218. Frantzen points to the fact that some American scholars use an Old English heritage in the project of creating their professional identities.

⁷ Timothy Brennan, "The National Longing for Form," *Nation and Narration* ed. Homi K. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990) 44-70, 44.

alist identification on to the Anglo-Saxonists, and most scholars try to dissociate themselves from it.

Identity can also be constructed the scholars by placing themselves or Old English literature in a historical continuity. It is often assumed, especially by scholars working with later periods of literature, that the Norman Conquest caused a complete break in traditions between Old and Middle English literature.⁸ Some Anglo-Saxonists, however, reject this assumption and argue for a continued tradition, which they see as running from Old English literature to Middle English to contemporary literature. Others create their professional identities through alterity: by rejecting and dissociating themselves from what they see as the “otherness” of the actions and thoughts of the Anglo-Saxons.

Identity construction in the past

In chapter two I referred to Stuart Hall’s two models of identity construction. Hall’s first model is that of a harking back to a communal past in order to create a sense of common identity with Anglo-Saxon society, which is what Frantzen calls a “desire for origins.” This model was used by the Anglo-Saxons themselves. Like some modern scholars, the Anglo-Saxons turned to the Roman writer Tacitus’ *Germania* to find a past for themselves, to explain where they came from.⁹ Tacitus wrote his work in the first century AD, outlining what he heard of the Germanic tribes on the continent. The Anglo-Saxons used *Germania* used to

mark and legitimize the birth of a Germanic consciousness, conceived by kings and scholars in emulation of the Caesars. The imagination of the Anglo-Saxons was stirred by this tradition, vague and unformed, of something majestic out of the distant past, of a golden age in which men were taller, bolder, freer and more glorious.¹⁰

In the introduction I showed how scholars in the sixteenth century, from a desire for origins, used Old English religious texts to narrate their origin. Yet religion was not the only tool that was used to shape the nation. Worldly politics also played a role in identity construction. During the Tudor era an image of a democratic past was invented, where kings ruled together with their people. King John, for instance, was praised as a democratic and egalitarian ruler for signing the Magna Carta. In the seventeenth century scholars extended this imagined past backwards from King John to the Anglo-Saxons in order to create a “historical ‘myth’ according to which the Eng-

⁸ For examples of this assumptions, see discussions on AnsaxDat 26/02 2002, under the heading “Re: A Cultural Divide.”

⁹ Frank 93.

¹⁰ Frank 104.

lish monarchy had always been implicitly contractual.”¹¹ The scholars of these periods constructed their identities, not so much by seeking affiliations with something, as dissociating and distancing themselves from the sphere of a Roman heritage.

Scholars of the nineteenth century, however, actively sought their affinities within the sphere of Germanic heritage. They rejected any alliances with Roman culture and Latin, Christian-influenced texts, and orientated themselves instead towards a pagan, Germanic identity. These views were particularly prominent in their approach to Old English poetry. Christian elements were read as intrusions and interpolations by meddling clerics copying texts composed by earlier, pagan, authors. These clerics were seen as destroying the vigour, spirit and originality of the texts. *The Wanderer* for example, has been regarded as such a victim of Christian meddling. Scholars have argued that the first and last five lines, which seem to display Christian sentiments, have been tacked on to a pagan poem. *Beowulf* has also been subject of intense scrutiny to establish whether its composer was Christian or pagan.¹²

Anglo-Saxon society as a source of identity does not only appeal to scholars born in Britain. The image of Anglo-Saxon society as based on ideas of honesty, loyalty and equality, that is, a society with no aristocracy, has informed identity construction on a political, as well as a personal plane, in the writings of Thomas Jefferson. He saw Anglo-Saxon society as embodying ideals of democracy that he wished to incorporate in the United States. This he aimed to do through the study of Old English in schools as well as through the construction of a legal system based on his idea of Anglo-Saxon law. At one point he wanted to make his influences clearly visible by placing the legendary leaders Hengest and Horsa on the Great Seal.¹³

The appropriation of Anglo-Saxon society as a means of narrating origin is perhaps most openly displayed in British history writing of the eighteenth and nineteenth century. The scholars writing during this period exhibit Hall’s first position, that of a fixed cultural identity which functions as a touchstone, when they, in their texts, create a national character present in the Anglo-Saxons of the past and developing into the British of the day. The authors are proponents of the Whig view of history, explaining how Britain owed its present supremacy to the primitive, yet superior mettle of the Anglo-Saxons. Thomas Babington, Lord Macaulay, is one of the strongest spokesmen for this view of history. In *The History of England*, a book intended to describe English history from 1688 to 1789, Macaulay includes a brief summary of the making of England, beginning with the Roman occupation. In this summary he exhibits all the traits we have come to expect from a Whig approach to historiography. He is convinced that the present grandeur of Britain was preordained: “the greatness

¹¹ Hugh Trevor-Roper, “Introduction,” *Lord Macaulay: The History of England* (1848-1861; Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1979) 9

¹² For a discussion of this line of research see Christine Fell “Paganism in *Beowulf*: a Semantic Fairytale,” *Pagans and Christians: The Interplay between Christian Latin and Traditional Germanic Cultures in Early Medieval Europe* ed. Hofstra et. al. (Groningen: Forsten, 1995) 9-34.

¹³ For a discussion of Jefferson’s ideas about Anglo-Saxon society, see Frantzen *Desire* 15-18, 203-207.

which she was destined to attain.”¹⁴ The Anglo-Saxon immigrants were barbarous and they “were still performing savage rites in the temples of Thor and Woden.” It was only the influence of the church that civilised the Anglo-Saxons, a church which he depicts as “deeply corrupted” but which was still preferable to pagan barbarism.¹⁵ Nevertheless, he argues that out of these crude beginnings emerged the glorious present of the English nation. As J. M. Kemble phrased it in 1849, the Anglo-Saxon history “is the history of the childhood of our own age,—the explanation of its manhood.”¹⁶ Likewise, Old English literature was often described as a national literature in its infancy, containing the seeds of later greatness. In 1919, it was argued that there exists a direct line of influence from the poetry of Cædmon “which culminated in direct descent in John Milton.”¹⁷

Identity construction in the present

Alliances with the Germanic sphere continue in twentieth century research.¹⁸ A change in orientation seems to be underway, however. Frantzen argues that there has been a shift towards Rome during the later part of the twentieth century:

The origins desired in the last century were supposed to exist in the woodlands of Northern Europe; the origins desired by Anglo-Saxon scholars in this century seem to be in Rome, or failing that source, a monastic library in Anglo-Saxon England.¹⁹

However, both orientations are present in the projected identities of contemporary scholars.

I stated earlier that nationalism in contemporary Old English research is rarely acknowledged. Some scholars, however, do state their affiliations clearly. One example is Kathleen Herbert, who, in her book *Looking for the Lost Gods of England*, makes no distinction between the Germanic tribes who lived on the continent during Tacitus’ time, the first century AD, the peoples who moved to England in the fifth century, and herself. They are all referred to as “we” and when she discusses the world view of the Germanic tribes, she calls it “our” world view, where the centre of “our” world lay elsewhere than it does today. Modern England is “our second Eng-

¹⁴ Thomas Babington, Lord Macaulay, *The History of England from the Accession of James the Second* (1848; London: George Routledge and Sons, 1907) 1.

¹⁵ Macauley 2.

¹⁶ Frantzen *Desire* 35.

¹⁷ G. F. Browne, *The Importance of Women in Anglo-Saxon Times; The Cultus of St Peter and St Paul; and Other Addresses* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1919) 26.

¹⁸ Exemplified, for example, by F. R. Leavis, who is said to have preferred “the native, racy, vigorous, strong, masculine” over “the classicizing, Italianate, alien, corrupt, voluptuous, effeminate, impotent.” Francis Mulhern, “English reading,” *Nation and Narration* ed. Homi K. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990) 250–64, 254.

¹⁹ Frantzen *Desire* 82.

land,” counting Angeln as the first.²⁰ Another striking example is the book *Our Englishness*, by the same publisher. On the blurb it is stated that in the book “seven authors,” one of whom is Kathleen Herbert, “who are positive about Englishness and their English identity,” discuss various aspects of what it means to be English. Some essays are very frank and personal, such as Fr. Andrew Phillips’ claim that he is not British, but English.²¹ In order to find an era that contains Englishness, Phillips works himself backwards in history, beginning with the eighteenth century and its construction of a British empire, finding fault with the kings and politicians of every age. He discovers this Englishness in the Old English church and laments the fact that it was subsequently lost. Other essays take a more scientific and impersonal approach, such as Tony Linsell’s investigation into nation and nationalism. A campaigner for an English Parliament, Linsell is not ashamed of nationalism. Instead he argues that it is “a natural, healthy, inborn, tenacious, communal sentiment.”²² His concern is rather that “Englishness is ridiculed and denied.”²³ Herbert and her co-authors are more outspoken than other scholars, who will not make such claims about identities, but the same affiliations and alliances underpin most Old English research.

It seems prudent for Anglo-Saxonists to avoid the issue of nationalism since constructions of professional identities, affiliations and nationalism can become very sensitive in Old English studies, especially in connection with the scholarship of the so-called Germanist school in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Linguistic and literary research, just like historical research, at that time based itself to a large extent on the concept of race, and the Germanic race was, as we know, privileged over others.²⁴ Scholars who adhered to the Germanist school saw the Anglo-Saxons as a Germanic people, first and foremost: fierce warriors conquering the weak Celts.²⁵ In the light of the Nazi preoccupation with race later on, the Germanist school is now proving to be an embarrassment to contemporary Anglo-Saxonists. There seems to exist a fear that the subject of Old English studies would be perceived as racist because of its connection with the Germanist school. Scholars who are interested in Old English literature and linguistics appear to lay themselves open to accusations of racism. This fear seems justified in the light of Terry Eagleton’s review of Seamus Heaney’s translation of *Beowulf*. In his review Eagleton conflates the use of philological methods devised by German scholars with “throwing in your hand with a bunch of Teutonic barbarians.”²⁶ Recognising that historically there have been strong connections

²⁰ Kathleen Herbert, *Looking for the Lost Gods of England* (Hockwold cum Wilton: Anglo-Saxon Books, 1994) 8.

²¹ Fr. Andrew Phillips, “The Resurrection of England,” *Our Englishness* ed. Tony Linsell (Hockwold cum Wilton: Anglo-Saxon Books, 2000) 37-48, 37.

²² Tony Linsell, “Nations, Nationalism and Nationalists,” *Our Englishness* 49-73, 64.

²³ Linsell 49.

²⁴ For a discussion of British scholars publishing on race, see Hugh A. MacDougall, *Racial Myth in English History: Trojans, Teutons, and Anglo-Saxons* (Montreal: Harvest House, 1982) chapter V.

²⁵ At the same time Irish scholars were constructing “an ethnically pure Celtic culture.” Siân Jones, *The Archaeology of Ethnicity: Constructing Identities in the Past and Present* (London: Routledge, 1997) 6.

²⁶ Terry Eagleton, “Hasped and hooped and hirpling: Heaney conquers Beowulf,” *The London Review of Books* Wednesday Nov. 3 (1999)

<http://www.booksunlimited.co.uk/lrb/articles/0,6109,99426,00.html> 14/3 2000.

between the search for an “English” identity and Old English research, Eagleton all but says outright that anyone who wishes to read Old English literature is ideologically suspect. A similar statement was made by Valentine Cunningham, of Corpus Christi College, Oxford. According to Cunningham, to make undergraduates study Old English is to continue a “German and English, northern European, male, Aryan-supremacist myth.”²⁷ It should be noted that the goal of Cunningham and Eagleton is to remove Old English studies from the undergraduate curriculum, in order to give room for the literature of later periods. As a point of attack they choose the alleged inherent racism of the subject. In this way accusations of nationalist affiliations become a political tool in the struggle for mastery over university curricula.

As is shown in Eagleton’s review, the close ties between the Germanist school and philological research into Old English literature make Old English studies a politically sensitive subject. For some scholars it thus becomes necessary to dissociate themselves from these Germanists and their research. In his summing up of a lifetime of Old English research, Eric John devotes several pages to distancing the discipline and its non-racist scholars from the Germanist school.²⁸ In his eagerness to dissociate and distance the field from racist ideas, John anticipates Eagleton’s argument. Because some Germanists, the “extreme believers” in race, saw the Germanic race “as determining all that was good in European history” all Germanist research is irredeemably tainted, he argues.²⁹ Judging by the fierceness of John’s text, it appears that he is attempting to pre-empt any attacks based on accusations of racism.

It may be a fear of being labelled “racist” that is influencing the attitudes amongst Anglo-Saxonists towards the ideas of identity construction and nationalism within the field. Scholars readily admit that Old English texts were appropriated and used for such purposes in the past, but are less willing to concede that they still are. It is pointed out that scholars of the last three centuries identified themselves with different perceived aspects of Anglo-Saxon society, and in some cases, as when Eric John discusses the Germanist school, this identification is deplored. I would argue, however, that the scholar’s identification with his or her chosen material and period is inevitable. Choices of subjects of study are guided by the scholar’s self-image, and by our interpretation of the historical societies. Sonja Laden has argued that the scholar performs “interpretive acts of retrospective appropriation,”³⁰ that is, becomes part of her subject. John Niles is outspokenly positive about searching for links with the past. “A continuing sense of the presentness of Anglo-Saxon England can do wonders toward making us aware of our own place amid the discontinuities and effacements that form the greater part of history.”³¹ This attempt at awareness can be labelled

²⁷ Valentine Cunningham, quoted by Peter Jackson in “The Future of Old English: A Personal Essay with an Additional Note,” *Selima* 3 (1993) 154-167, 159.

²⁸ John, *Reassessing Anglo-Saxon England* Chapter 1.

²⁹ John 7.

³⁰ Laden 73.

³¹ John Niles, “Appropriations: A Concept of Culture,” *Anglo-Saxonism and the Construction of Social Identity* ed. Allen J. Frantzen and John D. Niles (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997): 202-228, 221.

nationalistic, but that in itself is no reason why it should be deplored, as long as it is acknowledged.

Previous research into identity construction

As I stated in the introduction, appropriations of Old English texts for the use of identity construction have mostly been studied at a remove. In recent years doctoral theses have been submitted dealing with identity, but the identity discussed is that of the historical subject, not of contemporary academics.³² When the critics themselves have been under scrutiny, the studies have mainly focused on previous generations.

One work which looks at identity construction in the past is *Literary Appropriations of the Anglo-Saxons*, edited by Donald Scragg and Carole Weinberg.³³ The book is a collection of essays on texts ranging in time from Layamon's *Brut* to Tolkien. The essays discuss the different uses these texts have made of an Anglo-Saxon past and heritage. The introduction by Scragg traces the development of ideas of Englishness from the Anglo-Saxons themselves in the late ninth century, through the impact of the Norman Conquest and the revival of an English identity during the Renaissance, to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Scragg reiterates that the English of today have little sense of a national identity. Although not actually stated, it appears to be a general source of concern, and the book in question can be seen as an attempt to redress this. The essays in the volume investigate how generations following the Conquest came to terms with their own identity and how they constructed an Anglo-Saxon heritage. Jill Frederick, for example, shows the ways in which a text like *The South English Legendary* privileges Anglo-Saxon saints over Roman and British ones.³⁴ John Frankis traces the legend of king Ælle and the conversion of the English from Bede to Chaucer, showing the story of Ælle, coupled with an exemplary tale of a persecuted wife, being used to narrate the conversion of the English only to be changed into a moral romance by Gower and Chaucer.³⁵ A similar investigation into the use of legends is carried out by Daniel Donoghue, who looks at the idea of Lady Godiva, from the early Middle Ages, through the Victorian period and into modern cinema.³⁶ Godiva has travelled from "a respectable Anglo-Saxon countess, to a local celebrity, to a national hero, to an international marketing and pop icon."³⁷ Donoghue shows the legend blending eroticism with piety, and how, with the late addition of the character

³² See, for example, Janice Grossman "War, Gender and Religion in Tenth Century England: Struggles for Identity in Anglo-Saxon Texts," diss., University of California, Santa Barbara, 1996; Andrew P. Scheil, "Bodies and Boundaries: Studies in the Construction of Social Identity in Selected Late Anglo-Saxon Prose Texts," diss., University of Toronto, 1996; Stephen J. Harris, "Identity in Anglo-Saxon Literature: Ethnogenesis from Bede to Geoffrey of Monmouth," diss., Loyola University, 1999.

³³ *Literary Appropriations of the Anglo-Saxons* ed. Donald Scragg and Carole Weinberg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

³⁴ Jill Frederick, "The *South English Legendary*: Anglo-Saxon Saints and National Identity," *Literary Appropriations* 57-73.

³⁵ John Frankis, "King Ælle and the Conversion of the English: the Development of a Legend from Bede to Chaucer," *Literary Appropriations* 74-92.

³⁶ Daniel Donoghue, "Lady Godiva," *Literary Appropriations* 194-214.

³⁷ Donoghue 213.

Peeping Tom as a scapegoat legitimising interest in the spectacle, it became possible for the story of Lady Godiva to become popular with the Victorians, to the extent that Queen Victoria commissioned a statue of Godiva for Prince Albert. During the Victorian period Godiva came to symbolise an idyllic, pre-industrial age as well as concern for the well-being of the poor and underprivileged. In contrast to the de-eroticised image of Godiva of the nineteenth century, Donoghue points to the emphasis of twentieth century cinema on the voyeurism of the story, illustrating the scopophilic possibilities within the legend, concentrating on the male gaze.

As I have shown, issues of race and nationality are very sensitive within Old English studies. Ideas of nationalism and identity construction in general, as well as within Old English studies, are discussed by T. A. Shippey, but he chooses a different approach from, for example, Eric John.³⁸ Rather than simply assuming that an English identity is inherently suspect, he asks the question why there *is* no such thing as an English identity, pointing to four areas in which Old English studies could have contributed, but did not.³⁹ Shippey discusses what he refers to as “the destruction, or rather the repression” of the social identity of the English,⁴⁰ remarking that as regards historical studies, “pre-Conquest history is marked off as alien and discontinuous: nothing to do with *us*.”⁴¹ In the popular imagination King Arthur, as well as the Vikings, is instantly recognised by a wide audience, part of a “cultural literacy,” whereas the Anglo-Saxons are virtually unknown, Shippey points out. It is really only in sports, Shippey suggests, that an English national identity is expressed.⁴² Having established the lack of a national identity, Shippey outlines possible reasons for this lack, before asking the poignant question whether any of this matters. Do people need a national identity? Quoting Linda Colley, he points out that the forces that once created a British nation are now no longer at work, and that England, as well as the United Kingdom, is suffering from an identity crisis. Shippey postulates a future where there no longer *is* a United Kingdom, where the English will have to adjust, and where they may need a national identity, based on pre-Conquest history. Forging such a national identity will not be an uncontroversial task, however, Shippey warns us. Whereas discussions of a Scottish or Welsh national identity are uncontroversial, the mentioning of an English identity may bring on accusations of racism or fascism, as we have seen.⁴³

³⁸ T. A. Shippey, “The undeveloped image: Anglo-Saxon in popular consciousness from Turner to Tolkien,” *Literary Appropriations* 215-236.

³⁹ Those four areas are: religion, law, language study and race. Race is here referring to a feeling expressed during the nineteenth century that the Anglo-Saxon heritage was a great unifying force between Britain and the US. Shippey 220-23.

⁴⁰ Shippey 215.

⁴¹ Shippey 216, original emphasis.

⁴² In football and rugby, for example, England competes as a separate nation, against Scotland and Wales, and the team uses the English flag, rather than the Union Jack.

⁴³ Martin Nichols has posed the question why it should be the case that scholars of Celtic origin are allowed to research Irish, Scottish and Welsh history without comment, whereas it is considered ideologically suspect when English scholars study Anglo-Saxon history. AnsaxDat “Re: A Cultural Divide” 27/2 2002.

Identity construction also forms the core of *Anglo-Saxonism & the Construction of Social Identity*, edited by Allen Frantzen and John Niles.⁴⁴ The essays in this book are intended to explore the rise and development of Anglo-Saxonism during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, as well as during the nineteenth and twentieth century. Anglo-Saxonism is defined as the

process through which a self-conscious national and racial identity first came into being among the early peoples of the region that we now call England and how, over time, through both scholarly and popular promptings, that identity was transformed into an originary myth available to a wide variety of political and social interests.⁴⁵

Anglo-Saxonism thus comprises many of the aspects of identity construction that I discuss in this chapter. The essays chart the great span of uses to which Anglo-Saxonism has been put.

As already mentioned in the introduction, Allen Frantzen investigates John Bale's sixteenth century re-use of Bede's tale of Gregory the Great and the Anglian slaves, allowing Bale to construct a national, uncorrupted church separate from that of Rome.⁴⁶ Gregory A. VanHoosier-Carey traces in his essay the rising interest in Old English in the Southern States of the US after the Civil War.⁴⁷ According to VanHoosier-Carey the antebellum slave-owners identified themselves with the feudal Norman victors of the Conquest, but after the war they changed their affiliations to incorporate the Anglo-Saxons. The survival of the English language during Norman rule became a symbol of resistance to the survivors of the war. The study of Old English became a way of resisting Northern rule, and also a means of preserving a way of life which retained more features of Anglo-Saxon society than the North, according to VanHoosier-Carey.

Most surveys of the history of Old English studies, including my own in the introduction, restrict themselves to Britain. *Anglo-Saxonism & the Construction of Social Identity* is different in that it complements studies in Medieval and Renaissance Britain and Edwardian children's literature with investigations of American use of Anglo-Saxon society and its texts.⁴⁸ Additionally, one of the essays, by Robert E. Bjork, investigates the rise of Old English studies in Scandinavia.⁴⁹ He discusses how Old English studies played a large role in the nationalistic movements of Scandinavia

⁴⁴ *Anglo-Saxonism & the Construction of Social Identity* ed. Allen J. Frantzen and John D. Niles (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997).

⁴⁵ Allen J. Frantzen and John D. Niles, "Introduction: Anglo-Saxonism and Medievalism," *Anglo-Saxonism* 1-14, 1.

⁴⁶ Allen J. Frantzen, "Bede and Bawdy Bale: Gregory the Great, Angels, and the 'Angli,'" *Anglo-Saxonism* 17-39.

⁴⁷ Gregory A. VanHoosier-Carey, "Byrhtnoth in Dixie: The Emergence of Anglo-Saxon Studies in the Postbellum South," *Anglo-Saxonism* 157-172.

⁴⁸ Velma Bourgeois Richmond, "Historical Novels to Teach Anglo-Saxonism," *Anglo-Saxonism* 173-201.

⁴⁹ Robert E. Bjork, "Nineteenth-Century Scandinavia and the Birth of Anglo-Saxon Studies," *Anglo-Saxonism* 111-132.

during this period, as well as the tug-of-war between German, British and Scandinavian scholars over *Beowulf* and its language, which was variously rendered as a Danish or German dialect. The final essay in the book concerns the appropriation of culture; John Niles sums up the discussions of the book and outlines what lies behind Anglo-Saxonism.⁵⁰ He points out that appropriations express ideology and prestige, whilst at the same time hiding their constructedness. This is why, in my opinion, these appropriations need to be studied, something which the two books discussed above do. Both collections of essays point the way to more in-depth studies of the mechanisms behind appropriations of Old English literature and the uses to which the texts have been put.

Constructions of a professional identity through *Wife* and *Wulf*

Identity through religion and ancestry

I stated earlier that the tradition of Old English research dictates that affiliations are sought within either of two spheres, Roman or Germanic heritage. The scholar decides whether the texts are based on or influenced by Latin or Germanic texts and tradition, whether the literature “face[s] north or south.”⁵¹ These alliances with either of the two spheres surface in the research on *Wife* and *Wulf*. Not all scholars think that external sources should be sought, but amongst those who do, there is a long-standing debate as to where to look for these sources. Some favour Germanic sources, others Latin ones. Is the narrator of *Wife* a Germanic ghost, dwelling in a sacrificial grove, or the earthly church lamenting the loss of Christ? These questions are often connected with the existence of religious expression in the poems and whether this religion is Christian or “other”.

At times the question of Anglo-Saxon religion becomes a question of the scholar’s choice between what is seen as two established religions: Christianity and paganism. Less attention has been paid to the clashes between Celtic and Roman Christianity,⁵² and it is not always acknowledged that paganism is not one religion but a catch-all term referring to any religion that is pre-Christian.⁵³ Anglo-Saxon paganism, of which we know very little, is valorised by those critics who choose that alignment. They construct the pagan beliefs as more “genuine” and less oppressive than those of the encroaching Christianity. This view of paganism is made possible by the

⁵⁰ John Niles, “Appropriations: A Concept of Culture,” *Anglo-Saxonism* 202-228.

⁵¹ Liuzza 120.

⁵² By Anglo-Saxonists, that is. Celticists have carried out more research in this field. See, for instance, Patrick Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature in Western England 600-800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Nicholas Brooks, *The Early History of the Church of Canterbury* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1984); Jane Stevenson, “Christianity in Sixth- and Seventh-Century Southumbria” *The Age of Sutton Hoo* ed. M. O. H. Carver (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1992): 175-183.

⁵³ Pre-Christian is a difficult term, implying that Christianisation is inevitable, yet it is difficult to find another term that is more suitable.

fact that the pagan Anglo-Saxons left no written material about their religious practices, and the archaeological material, in the form of burials, and postholes from possible temples, is difficult to interpret, leaving space for scholars to add their own expectations.

What we do know of Anglo-Saxon religion is based on the writings of Bede, place-name evidence and archaeological findings. Bede wrote about pagan worship in his *Historia Ecclesiastica Gens Anglorum*, but since he was rather divorced in time and place from the pagan areas, allowances have to be made as to the accuracy of his descriptions.⁵⁴ The most prevailing traces of pagan worship in Britain are place names incorporating what seems to be the names of pagan deities, such as Thundersley (Thunor) and Wednesbury (Woden), or places of worship such as Harrowden and Wyham.⁵⁵ Scholars have tried to postulate how the rituals and beliefs of the Anglo-Saxons may have manifested themselves, based on artefacts and place names.⁵⁶ Frequently they turn to Scandinavian and continental sources, as well as Tacitus' *Germania*. I would argue that they take a metaphoric view of the religious beliefs, regarding them as being one and the same. The Germanic Wotan, the Anglo-Saxon Woden and the Norse Oðin are collapsed into one god, whose rituals of worship are assumed to have been the same in every country regardless of period. As Christine Fell states:

[i]t is naturally tempting to reduce our evidence to the controllable, similarly tempting to use any fragment of that evidence as a piece in a jigsaw, even if we have to manipulate or massage the piece to ensure a fit. If we have a mythology that includes a god Woden / Wotan / Oðinn it is more satisfying to establish links and patterns than reject the links and leave ourselves with unpatterned unrelated bric-a-brac.⁵⁷

As regards Anglo-Saxon beliefs in local spirits and practices to cure sickness, we have more material, in the form of charms. In one charm we find references to Woden and Christ in the same text,⁵⁸ which suggests that the religious traditions existed concurrently, but we have no access to the underlying structures of belief.

A professional identity based on affiliations with pagan roots is often concerned with the concepts of antiquity and precedence.⁵⁹ Not only is the literature regarded as Germanic rather than Roman in motivation and execution, but the Germanic roots make the literature older and somehow more "genuine," expressing the "true" nature of the people. Norse literature, which is often referred to as a model for Old English

⁵⁴ The last place to be converted to Christianity was the Isle of Man in the seventh century. Bede was born in 673 and spent his whole life in Northumbria.

⁵⁵ David Wilson, *Anglo-Saxon Paganism* (London: Routledge, 1992) Chapter 1.

⁵⁶ See, for example, Gale Owen, *Rites and Religions of the Anglo-Saxons* (London: Barnes and Noble 1981).

⁵⁷ Fell "Paganism in *Beowulf*" 10.

⁵⁸ "The Nine Herbs Charm," *Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records* 6 ed. Elliott van Kirk Dobbie (New York: Columbia University Press, 1942) 119-121.

⁵⁹ For a discussion of creations of nationhood in the epic through the use of concepts of "beginning," "first" and "ancestor," see Brennan 50.

texts, was written down later than the Old English texts it is supposed to have influenced. However, both Norse and Old English literature are regarded as reflections of a much older way of life and a much older worldview, which is privileged over Roman literature, be it influenced by classical literature or Christian teachings.

The concern for precedence and the archaic nature of Old English literature through an alliance with a Germanic identity is evident in, for example, the work of Raymond Tripp, Jr. Tripp reads Old English literature as exhibiting Anglo-Saxon ideas of the supernatural,⁶⁰ and these ideas he sees as stemming from an ancient Germanic origin.⁶¹ His readings of Old English elegies like *Wife*, *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer* are based on the assumption that the narrators of those poems are ghosts. There is no unequivocal written evidence of such traditions in Anglo-Saxon England, but since Tripp orientates his interpretation towards a common Germanic past he makes use of Norse sources in support of his material. In his article "The Narrator as Revenant" we see the conflict between ideas of Anglo-Saxon England as Germanic or Roman when he claims that previous scholars have not realised the nature of the ghostly narrators because of the prevalent image of Anglo-Saxon literature as modelled on classical examples, or as he puts it, because of "an unconscious [L]atinate bias [which] encouraged a superimposition of classical, Mediterranean patterns upon cognate but earlier stages of northern traditions."⁶² The tradition Tripp reacts against here is that of scholarly work informed by classical ideals. Tripp rejects religious and allegorical readings of the elegies and seeks support from Old Icelandic research, where ghostly narrators apparently are prevalent. The intersection of oral traditions with a Germanic origin is also evident, in that Tripp views the poems as exponents of a popular ballad tradition. A keyword in his reading is *archaic*, a word that recurs in his text. Like many scholars searching for a Germanic alliance, he sees the poem as a pagan base with a Christian superstructure, but he stresses the archaic nature of the sentiments expressed in *Wife* and the other elegies, which functions as a substructure to "Christian interpolation."⁶³

Some Germanic-orientated scholars see Old English texts as products of an intersection of Christian and pagan traditions rather than a question of "either/or." Sometimes it is assumed that the texts are written out of repressed paganism, coated with a thin veneer of Christianity, but with paganism bursting through the cracks. At other times the texts are seen as thoroughly grounded in a Christian culture, but with recurrences of older, pagan traditions, perhaps not even understood by the poet himself. The idea of *Wife* as spoken by a ghost, drawn from Germanic traditions entwined with Christian traditions, has also been discussed by William C. Johnson.⁶⁴ He sees

⁶⁰ See, for example, his article "The Effect of the Occult and the Supernatural upon the Way We Read Old English Poetry," *Literature and the Occult: Essays in Comparative Literature* ed. Luanne Frank (Arlington: University of Texas at Arlington, 1977) 255-63.

⁶¹ See, for instance, "Odin's Power and the Old English Elegies," *The Old English Elegies: New Essays in Criticism and Research* ed. Martin Green (London: Associated University Presses, 1983) 57-68.

⁶² Tripp, "The Narrator as Revenant: A Reconsideration of Three Old English Elegies" 340.

⁶³ Tripp "Revenant" 360.

⁶⁴ William C. Johnson, "The Wife's Lament as Death-Song," *The Old English Elegies: New Essays in Criticism and Research* ed. Martin Green (London: Associated University Presses, 1983) 69-81.

the poem as a re-working of what he has termed “the Germanic death-song.”⁶⁵ His Germanic allegiances resonate in his quotation of Nora Chadwick’s claim that the “the death-chant is an ancient Teutonic institution.”⁶⁶ As in Tripp’s work, antiquity is again foregrounded.

Like so many other scholars, Johnson turns to Norse texts in order to find parallel examples. To a greater extent than Tripp, however, Johnson interprets the poem as an amalgam of different traditions. He reads it as a Christian exploration of what happens to the soul after death, couched in terms of a pagan, Germanic past.

Both Tripp and Johnson use Norse sources of a relatively late date to claim an ancient Germanic connection. Another use of Germanic heritage is to see Scandinavian influence in Old English texts. It has even been suggested that texts like *Wulf* are translations of Old Norse poems.⁶⁷ The idea of Scandinavian influence has also been explored by Richard North in his interpretation of *Wulf*.⁶⁸ Unlike Tripp and Johnson, North does not stress a supposed ancient origin, but constructs a much later setting, claiming that it is a riddle, a “charade for winter evenings in the Danelaw.”⁶⁹ His argument is that the metre of the poem is based on the same template as that of the Icelandic *Volsungasaga*. North sees the metre of *Wulf* as echoing the metre of the Edda, *ljóðahattr*, and claims that some words in the poem are of Scandinavian origin, for example *giedd*.

The *Volsungasaga* is a recurring suggestion as context or source for *Wulf*.⁷⁰ North has followed this suggestion and postulates that the speaker of *Wulf* is Signy, one of the main characters of the *Volsungasaga*. North sees the poem as not only using Norse metre and vocabulary, but also employing Norse imagery. As an example he suggests that the event *þonne mec se beaducafa bogum bilegde* is the poet’s use of a Norse image of the warrior as a “tree of battle.”⁷¹

Precedence and antiquity are not as important to scholars favouring a Roman heritage. One way of aligning the secular texts with a Roman heritage is to apply classical models to the literature. *Beowulf* is read as if it were a classical epic like the *Iliad* or the *Aeneid*.⁷² As I mentioned before, some of the poems of the *Exeter Book* are called elegies, although they do not really fulfil the classical criteria. Another kind of alignment is to read Old English poems as allegories. The characters of Judith and Elene, both found in religious texts, have been read as allegorical figures of *Ecclesia*. This allegorical mode of reading has been extended to poems that are not overtly Christian. Michael Swanton has, for example, interpreted *Wife* as the Earthly Church

⁶⁵ Johnson 72.

⁶⁶ Johnson 73.

⁶⁷ See W. W. Lawrence, “The First Riddle of Cynewulf,” *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 17 (1902) 247-61.

⁶⁸ North, “Metre and Meaning in *Wulf* and *Eadwacer*: Signy Reconsidered.”

⁶⁹ North 53.

⁷⁰ See, for example William Schofield, “Signy’s Lament,” *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 17 (1902) 262-95; Hough.

⁷¹ North 42.

⁷² Frantzen *Desire* 191. Michael Swanton has claimed “*Beowulf* is to English what the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* are to Greek language and literature.” *Beowulf* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1978) 1.

lamenting the loss of Christ.⁷³ He sees the terms the narrator uses for her lord, *hlaford* 'lord,' *leodfruma* 'leader of men,' *frea* 'ruler,' as the address of a retainer rather than a wife. Unlike the "paganists," Swanton, however, turns to the Christian image of the Anglo-Saxons. Swanton argues that the poems in the *Exeter Book* are not notations of earlier, pagan poems, but that the scribe is also the poet, and so he argues that the Christian elements are integral parts of the texts, rather than later cosmetic changes. In his study of *Wife*, Swanton points to Christian imagery that was known to the Anglo-Saxons such as the Journey of Life and Death, and the Heavenly Bride. The Journey of Life and Death is, according to Swanton, what we meet in *Wife* when the narrator talks of the departure of her lord, and the concept of the Heavenly Bride explains the identity of the narrator. Reading the poem allegorically, his conclusion is that the narrator is the Christian Church, the bride of Christ, and she feels deserted by Him.

Not all scholars who prefer Christian readings accept allegorical features, however. Alain Renoir regards the poem as Christian in outlook, but he claims that there is no reason to read allegory into it.⁷⁴ Renoir focuses on the similarities and differences between the situation of the narrator and the *geong mon* at the end of the poem. He stresses repeatedly that although these situations may be similar, a great difference is made by the narrator's passivity.⁷⁵ Renoir sees such a contrast in the behaviour of the narrator and her lord as basis for a claim that the two characters seem designed to illustrate the *animus* and the *anima*. The narrator's present situation is merely a continuation of previous miseries, whereas the lord has suffered a complete inversion in life. Renoir argues that this inversion, a happy, active life turned into passive misery, is the focus of the poem, and the narrator therefore merely functions as a foil for her lord, in order to emphasise his inversion. This "Christian" inversion is, according to Renoir, not intended to "call to mind a fundamental Christian doctrine," but he argues that it "must unavoidably affect the impact of the narrative upon a Christian audience," whether by design or not.⁷⁶ Seeing the poem as composed by a Christian poet allows Renoir to argue, like many scholars, that since the *Exeter Book* was donated to the cathedral by a bishop, its content must have been approved by him, and must therefore be Christian in nature. In regarding the poetry of the *Exeter Book* as contemporary with its manuscript, Renoir assumes a Christian audience. In his interpretation, however, he defers judgement on a number of points of interpretation of the poem, claiming that the poem has been interpreted in so many ways that it suffers from a "cris[i]s of identity."⁷⁷ Even in his assumption that the poem is drawing on Christian forms of expression, which he argues must have resonated within the audience, he will not make claims for this being either intentional or accidental. This is a

⁷³ Michael J. Swanton, "The Wife's Lament and The Husband's Message: A Reconsideration," *Anglia* 82 (1964) 269-90.

⁷⁴ Alain Renoir, "Christian Inversion in *The Wife's Lament*," *Studia Neophilologica* 49 (1977) 19-24. He quotes W. Kendrick Pritchett in saying that we must not assume "that the ancients 'were guilty of all the subtleties attributed to them'" 23.

⁷⁵ Renoir 21. The idea of the narrator as passive has been rejected by some feminists, which I will discuss further in chapter 5.

⁷⁶ Renoir 23.

⁷⁷ Renoir 19

departure from the usual approach when critics argue for Christian elements in Old English texts. Most scholars see Old English authors of Christian prose like sermons and saints' lives as careful and meticulous, leaving nothing to chance.⁷⁸ This carefulness and planning, they argue, the authors brought with them when composing poetry. Renoir, on the other hand, seems to favour an image of the clerical authors as so steeped in Christian ways of thinking that Christian ideas and ideals will seep, unconsciously even, into texts not overtly Christian.

Looking at Christian texts and discerning which elements are Christian and which are pagan has been a project pursued by some Anglo-Saxonists. To give an example, *The Dream of the Rood*, a text spoken by a narrator confronted by a speaking True Cross, has been dissected in order to study the perceived blend of pre-Christian and Christian elements.⁷⁹ There is also a long-standing debate as to whether *The Wanderer* has had Christian elements tacked on, whether *metod* 'fate' refers to God and whether *dryhten* 'ruler' should be interpreted as an earthly or heavenly lord.

James Spamer follows in the tradition of Christian interpretations when he argues that the last two lines of *Wulf* are a biblical paraphrase.⁸⁰ The lines read: *Þæt mon eaþe tosliteð þætte næfre gesomnad wæs,/ uncer giedd geador*.⁸¹ Spamer suggests that they are an echo of Matthew 19:6b in the Vulgate: *quod ergo deus coniunxit homo non separet* 'that which God has joined, man may not put asunder.'⁸² As a basis for this argument he investigates different translations of this line into Old English, which use the words *tosliteð* and *gesomnad*.⁸³ Spamer's interpretation of the poem is thus that the narrator has been forced into some sort of socially accepted relationship with Eadwacer, which she rejects.

When looking at the interpretations of the poems that I have discussed we see that the same text elicits very different readings, depending on which sphere the scholar allies him- or herself with. Those who opt for a Germanic heritage construct the poems as old, referring back to "truly archaic values."⁸⁴ Those critics who read them as Christian texts generally see them as more recent. Seeing a Christian motivation behind the text does not mean that the scholars will interpret them in the same way, however. Where Swanton sees allegory, Spamer sees fraught personal relationships.

⁷⁸ See, for example, David Howlett, "The Structure of the Dream of the Rood," *Studia Neophilologica* 48 (1976) 301-06.

⁷⁹ It is pointed out, for example, that Christ is styled like a warrior, it is the Cross that suffers, and that the disciples are described as retainers, circling the dead body of Christ on horseback, as Beowulf's retainers do.

⁸⁰ Spamer, "The Marriage Concept in *Wulf and Eadwacer*."

⁸¹ That is easily torn asunder that which was never joined, our song together. ll. 18-19

⁸² Spamer 143.

⁸³ Other scholars have fastened on the echoes of tearing and sewing in these words.

⁸⁴ Tripp 341.

Identity through continuity

Old English studies are, like any field of study, dogged by issues of nationalism.⁸⁵ As I mentioned earlier, the spectre of Nazism lies over the subject, but even if their interests do not include fascism, scholars sometimes find themselves discussing the “nature of the English” and their literature. Some scholars who construct a professional identity through an English literary canon may find themselves boxed in by the Norman Conquest and its impact. The Conquest reorientated public society from a Germanic north to a Roman south. The official language was changed; new literary influences arrived. As stated earlier the tradition of literary studies of later periods frequently takes the Conquest as its starting point, arguing that Old English poetry is unrelated to English literature, the Norman Conquest being regarded as a complete breach between Old English poetry and that of later periods.⁸⁶ Textbooks of literary history sometimes begin with Chaucer,⁸⁷ and in some departments of English, English literary history begins with Shakespeare. The argument is that not only did the language change completely, but that the orientation of the poetry, as well as the sources of influence on poets, changed so drastically that there are no discernible lines of continuity between the two bodies of poetry.⁸⁸ It is assumed that Chaucer and his contemporaries could not read Old English, and therefore could not have been influenced; *ergo*, no continuity.⁸⁹ This supposed lack of continuity has also been an argument for dropping Old English studies as a subject in English departments at universities in Britain. It is argued that Old English literature has nothing to do with later English literature, and that the subject should therefore be discontinued in favour of more urgent topics of study.⁹⁰

For those Anglo-Saxonists who wish to see a national body of poetry whose lines of continuity stretch from the earliest Old English poems to modern poetry, this perceived discontinuity poses a problem. Scholars choose different strategies to deal with this. One strategy is to try to show that there did indeed exist literary influences. C. L. Wrenn, for example, argues that there are two kinds of continuity: continuity of

⁸⁵ Tom Nairn claims that nationalism is a disease of modern development history, with a “built-in capacity for descent into dementia.” Benedict Anderson *Imagined Communities: Reflection on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983) 14.

⁸⁶ For an outline of arguments for a lack of continuity in Old English literature and a refutation of this lack, see R. W. Chambers, *On the Continuity of English Prose from Alfred to More and his School* (1932; London: Oxford University Press, 1950) lxiv-lxxxii.

⁸⁷ See, for example, Robert Barnard, *A Short History of English Literature* 2nd edition (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1995), which has as its first chapter “The Age of Chaucer.”

⁸⁸ Michael Alexander, for instance, has claimed that what little continuity there may be is “linguistic and historical rather than literary.” “The Cult of Anglo-Saxon” 13.

⁸⁹ Thorlac Turville-Petre has attempted to trace a continuation from Old English poetry to what he calls an alliterative revival in the middle of the fourteenth century. His work is not addressed in the sources I have come across, however. Thorlac Turville-Petre *The Alliterative Revival* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1977).

⁹⁰ George Clark has suggested that there exists a view of Anglo-Saxon society based on “the literature of the French-dominated upper class and the official documents created by and for that ruling elite.” Scholars adhering to this view consequently assume that there is a gap in the literary tradition. “This gap they would then take as an excuse not to include OE literature in courses in English literature.” AnsaxDat “Re: A Cultural Divide?” 26/02 2002.

form and continuity of subject-matter. That there is continuity at all he attributes to “the traditional English preference for gradual rather than sudden movement.”⁹¹ In a close linguistic study, he argues that not only can we find traces of influence in certain phrases from *Beowulf* to *Andreas* to *Judith* but also across the Norman divide into the late twelfth century text *Poema Morale*. He also sees a continuation of rhythm and diction in poems like *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Pearl*.⁹² In a comparison of stresses, he finds recurring features based on “a fundamental continuity in the patterns of English speech,” a continuity he also finds in Algernon Charles Swinburne and Gerard Manley Hopkins. Wrenn’s conclusion is that “there is a real continuity in external form in English poetry, though of a limited kind.”

As regards continuity of subject-matter, Wrenn argues that English poetry is characterised by a “didactic strain” and that the “‘gnomic’ moralizing” of Old English poetry has “remained fairly constant” through the ages. Wrenn finds these features not only in the Old English *The Wanderer* but also in *Macbeth* and in Gray’s “Elegy in a Country Churchyard.” Wrenn also traces a strong interest in nature as a continuous theme in English poetry from the Anglo-Saxons to Chaucer to Browning to Hopkins.

Mysticism, however, did not enter English poetry until the late thirteenth century, and is, therefore, according to Wrenn, not an “English quality.” We see here the construction of a professional identity. Wrenn is looking for a continuous “national” mode of poetry, an English way of expressing “basic thoughts and feelings which ... transcend the barriers of time and place and culture.” Again the perceived dichotomy between Germanic and Roman culture comes into play. Continental ideas that enter English poetry are not seen as becoming integral parts of “Englishness” but remain foreign, since they were not present during the Anglo-Saxon era. We also see this rejection of continental influence in his idea of love as a poetic theme. Wrenn argues that love only became a poetic theme with the influence of “the emotional and ego-centric attitudes of Latin poetry,” since love in poetry “was alien to the Germanic mind.”⁹³

Because of the perceived linguistic chasm between Old and Middle English literature, most scholars who argue for continuity tend to do so on grounds of subject matter, however, rather than on grounds of language and form. One group of scholars, who are less concerned with questions of nationality, argue for a continuity within the genre of *Frauenlieder*, a genre not discussed by Wrenn.

One of the first scholars to bring up the concept of *Frauenlieder* in the twentieth century was Theodor Frings, discussing continental troubadours,⁹⁴ and has later been discussed and augmented by Anglo-Saxonists. Frings and other scholars, such as Leo Spitzer,⁹⁵ have argued that *Frauenlieder* is a genre of poems transcending boundaries

⁹¹ C. L. Wrenn, “On the Continuity of English Poetry,” *Anglia* 76 (1958) 41-59, 58. The following section is based on this essay.

⁹² Wrenn 48-51.

⁹³ Wrenn 45-46. In a later revision of this essay he changed it to “practically alien.” *A Study of Old English* (New York: Norton, 1967) 21.

⁹⁴ Theodor Frings, *Minnesinger und Troubadours* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1949).

⁹⁵ Leo Spitzer, “The Mozarabic Lyric and Theodor Frings’s Theories,” *Comparative Literature* IV.1 (1952) 1-22.

of time and space. These poems are expressed in the voice of a woman, though most often written by men, and the subject matter is generally that of the woman's longing for an absent lover, her fear of losing him, or her grief over a love already lost. Some poems, however, celebrate an ongoing passionate relationship. In order to establish this international genre scholars like Frings and Spitzer draw on examples from such disparate sources as ancient Egypt and China, and high medieval Provence and Andalusia.⁹⁶

As stated previously, Wrenn argues that Old English poetry does not concern itself with love. Other scholars, who work with *Frauenlieder* or love-lyrics, argue the exact opposite. Where Wrenn rejected continental influence, these scholars embrace it. In an essay that, like Wrenn's, pays homage to a study by R. W. Chambers,⁹⁷ Peter Dronke states as a commonplace that *Deor*, *Wulf*, *Wife* and *The Husband's Message* are, in a way, all love-lyrics.⁹⁸ He looks at a number of late twelfth or early thirteenth century texts which he claims contain elements not found in contemporary continental lyrics. These twelfth and thirteenth century lyrics are therefore closer to Old English lyrics than their contemporary continental counterparts.

Again, unlike Wrenn, Dronke concentrates on subject-matter alone. He organises his material in a chronology which is the opposite of Wrenn's. He starts by looking at Middle English texts, establishing a pattern of "narrative enigma" and images of lovers separated by water. He then moves back in time to Old English poems like *Wulf* and *Wife* and finds the same pattern in those texts. Where Wrenn sees no love, only fragments that cannot be deciphered, Dronke sees love as well as a narrative technique that is carried over from Old to Middle English, a "persistence of narrative enigma."⁹⁹ Dronke highlights that particular aspect which has confounded Anglo-Saxonists for so long, the fragmentary nature of the poems, and claims that it is an integral part of Old and Middle English love-lyrics, that the poet does it by design, possibly to tease, or to draw us in. Dronke casts his net wider than is usual amongst Anglo-Saxonists in his study, arguing that extant, vernacular poetry of the early Middle Ages, be it Germanic or Celtic, "is filled with such dramatic, quasi-narrative lyrical laments."¹⁰⁰

Continuity does not have to stop with Middle English literature, however. Hugh Magennis argues for continuous influence into the twentieth century.¹⁰¹ As examples he gives not only Ezra Pound's version of *The Seafarer*, but also the work of Jorge Luis Borges, Louis MacNeice and Richard Wilbur.

⁹⁶ I will discuss *Frauenlieder* in greater detail in chapter 5.

⁹⁷ Chamber's survey from 1932 was called *On the Continuity of English Prose, from Alfred to More and his School*.

⁹⁸ Peter Dronke, "On the Continuity of Medieval English Love-Lyric," *England and the Continental Renaissance: Essays in Honour of J. B. Tripp* ed. Edward Chaney and Peter Mack (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1990) 7-21.

⁹⁹ Dronke 9.

¹⁰⁰ Dronke 17.

¹⁰¹ Hugh Magennis, "Some Modern Writers and Their *Fontes Anglo-Saxonici*," *Old English Newsletter* 24.3 (1991) 14-18.

In the approaches to Old English poetry that I have outlined above, we see an identity created where there is a continuous literary flow of influences that binds the contemporary scholar to the scholars and poets of the past. The continuity is constructed, not through linguistic similarities, but through transhistorical expressions of emotions. There is an underlying desire for a national expression in many scholars' construction of continuity, for example in Wrenn's work, where the continuity is based on an intrinsically "English" literary quality. In other research, such as that of Dronke, the national yearnings are less pronounced.

Identity construction through alterity

Not all scholars construct their professional identity through identification with the Anglo-Saxons. Some prefer to dissociate themselves by rejecting the Anglo-Saxons and constructing them as Other. We see this, for example, in the attitude of eighteenth century British scholars, who felt that the superior Romano-British culture had been brutalised by the inferior, barbaric Anglo-Saxons, or, as Frantzen phrases it, scholars felt that the "classical heritage of England was pure, but it had been sullied and sacrificed to Saxon culture, its ancient monuments destroyed."¹⁰² Although there were many scholars interested in the Anglo-Saxon language, it was a generally held view that the Anglo-Saxon past had very little to recommend it. Jonathan Swift, for example, was of the opinion that those who studied Old English were "men of low genius" and the language they studied was a "vulgar tongue, so barren and so barbarous."¹⁰³

These opinions were held by historians and antiquarians, scholars who were not Anglo-Saxonists. Yet we also meet this dissociation amongst Anglo-Saxonists of later periods, where scholars construct the Anglo-Saxons as barbaric and "not like us."

Two approaches are particularly noticeable in this dissociation, both stemming from a view of the Anglo-Saxons as primitive: one is to construct the Anglo-Saxons as brutal barbarians, the other to see them as intellectually inferior. Barbarian Anglo-Saxon men are often discussed in relation to Anglo-Saxon women. It is assumed that the women were abused and mistreated in ways that are unthinkable in later, civilised times. In 1862 John Thrupp took it upon himself to rectify what he saw as a popular view of Anglo-Saxon women as liberated characters in charge of their own existence. He stated that it is only in a civilised society that a woman "attains the position due to her natural dignity," but "where the people are barbarous, the rank of the female sex is humble."¹⁰⁴ Because the Anglo-Saxons were such barbarians, women suffered terribly, and Thrupp claims

¹⁰² Frantzen *Desire* 51.

¹⁰³ Jonathan Swift, *A Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English tongue* (1712; Menston: The Scolar Press Limited, 1969) 40.

¹⁰⁴ John Thrupp, *The Anglo-Saxon Home: A History of the Domestic Institutions and Customs of England, from the Fifth to the Eleventh Century* (London: Longman, Green, Longman & Roberts, 1862) 19.

that the Anglo-Saxon women were, at one time, sold by their fathers and always beaten by their husbands; that they were menial servants even when of royal rank; that they were habitually subject to coarse personal insult; and that they were never addressed, even in poetry, in the language of passion or respect.¹⁰⁵

This image of barbaric Anglo-Saxon men abusing Anglo-Saxon women lives on in later research as well. I have already referred briefly to the work of the archaeologist Sonia Chadwick Hawkes and the osteoarchaeologist Dr. Calvin Wells in chapter one in connection with my discussion of alterity. I will return here to their article from 1975 to look at it in terms of identity construction. Hawkes and Wells postulated a theory to explain two anomalous burials in a pagan Anglo-Saxon cemetery, dating from the late fifth or early sixth century.¹⁰⁶ In the case of one of the burials, that of a young woman, their conclusion is that she was raped and then buried alive as punishment for sexual misconduct. The archaeological evidence for this conclusion is very scanty. In order to support their theory the authors rely on written sources: laws from neighbouring kingdoms, although from a later date, Tacitus' account of the continental Germanic tribes as well as a letter written by Boniface written in 746-747, detailing how adulteresses in "old Saxony" are killed. These sources can only provide circumstantial evidence at best.¹⁰⁷ The affiliations of Hawkes and Wells are quite clear, however, when they postulate that it is very likely that an Anglo-Saxon rape victim would be buried alive, since Anglo-Saxon society "was a pagan community as yet untouched by ameliorating influences from Church or enlightened kingship."¹⁰⁸ Hawkes and Wells make comparisons between the northern pagan society and Islamic societies, stating that "[i]t is said that in parts of the Islamic world" raped women were thought to have dishonoured the family and that they were habitually killed to rehabilitate the family. "Did Anglo-Saxons ever react like this?" Hawkes and Wells ask.¹⁰⁹ Although they admit that they have no tangible proof for their theories, and therefore cannot be "unassailably dogmatic" they can be "nearly certain" since "[w]e know that lust, rapine, blood and vengeance stalked across Early Saxon England."¹¹⁰ In their construction of professional identities, Hawkes and Wells seek their alliances by dissociating themselves from the uncivilised, unchristian Anglo-Saxons. They construct an image of Anglo-Saxon men as primitive and barbaric and ascribe actions to them based on the fact that they were of a pagan people.

The idea of Anglo-Saxon men as tormentors of women is present in literary criticism as well. In her interpretation of *Wife*, Elinor Lench postulates that the narrator is a ghost, and that she has been killed as punishment for alleged adultery.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁵ Thrupp 21.

¹⁰⁶ Hawkes and Wells, "Crime and Punishment."

¹⁰⁷ I will discuss the use of these sources in more detail in chapter four.

¹⁰⁸ Hawkes and Wells 121.

¹⁰⁹ Hawkes and Wells 120.

¹¹⁰ Hawkes and Wells 121-22.

¹¹¹ Lench, "*The Wife's Lament: A Poem of the Living Dead.*"

Lench's conclusion that the narrator is dead is a thought-provoking suggestion, and she demonstrates how the text can support such an interpretation. It is interesting, however, when looking at her work from the point of identity construction, that she chooses accusations of adultery as the reason why the narrator is dead. Lench claims that amongst the Anglo-Saxons, adultery was punishable by death.¹¹² She offers no substantial support for this statement, but presents her statement as self-evident, requiring no evidence. Of all the possible reasons why the narrator was killed Lench chooses death for a sexual transgression. Again Anglo-Saxon society is constructed as a barbarian Other, where women are not treated as well as they are in later, civilised societies.

Another means of dissociation is to construct the Anglo-Saxons as primitive in mind, lacking the critical faculties of modern people. In his study of *Wife*, Rudolph Bambas, whom I discussed in chapter one from the point of view of alterity, favours the interpretation that the narrator is a man, not a woman.¹¹³ The reason for this is, he argues, apart from Anglo-Saxon society not having the necessary interest in women to want to listen to a poem about a woman's emotions, that the audience would not be able to understand a male poet speaking in the voice of a woman. Not only would the *scop* not be able to imitate a woman successfully, since "so much mimetic capacity in the eighth or ninth century is difficult to believe in,"¹¹⁴ but his audience would not be able to understand that he was putting on the guise of a woman.¹¹⁵ Bambas does not construct the male Anglo-Saxons as brutal towards women, only profoundly uninterested in them, and lacking in the intellectual faculties we meet in later societies.

As can be seen, identity construction through dissociation can be just as strong as identity construction through identification. The scholars I have mentioned above are genuinely interested in Anglo-Saxon society, history and literature, yet at the same time as they embrace their chosen topic, they construct the members of their chosen society as examples of total alterity, an otherness that influences the critics' work.

Another type of dissociation, which sometimes manifests itself in rather amusing ways, is the claim that Old English poetry is not worth the parchment it was written on. Particularly *Beowulf* has incurred the wrath of many former students,¹¹⁶ and it has even been included in a list of expendable literary works.¹¹⁷ Kingsley Amis wrote a poem called *Beowulf* expressing his distaste for the original.¹¹⁸ There are even a few Anglo-Saxonists who feel that Old English literature, and poetry in particular, is not really of as high a literary quality as has been claimed. Michael Alexander has stated that although the literature has some minor merits to recommend it, it is by no means

¹¹² Lench 15.

¹¹³ Bambas, "Another View of the Old English *Wife's Lament*."

¹¹⁴ Bambas 304.

¹¹⁵ Bambas 309.

¹¹⁶ One of the most famous comments is perhaps Woody Allen's statement in *Annie Hall* that one should not take any courses where they make the students study *Beowulf*.

¹¹⁷ Brigid Brophy et. al., *Fifty Works of English and American Literature We Could Do Without* (London: Rapp & Carroll, 1967)

¹¹⁸ Kingsley Amis, *Collected Poems 1944-1979* (London: Hutchinson, 1979) 18.

a necessity for a degree in English literature.¹¹⁹ These writers and scholars, however, protest against Old English literature, not as it stands, but as how it has been taught. As Alexander observes, concerning his own undergraduate studies: “[p]oems were specimens of language posing scholarly problems of a linguistic-historical sort,” and as such not really taught to be enjoyed.¹²⁰

He is one of few Anglo-Saxonists, however, to criticise the literary quality of Old English poetry. Not surprisingly, not one of the scholars writing on *Wife* and *Wulf* that I have read, has expressed such sentiments. Although they construct their professional identities through dissociation from, rather than through affiliation with, Anglo-Saxon society, they are all in agreement that the texts produced are of high literary merit.

Identity construction is, as we have seen, an integral part of scholarship and the expression of professional affiliations. Most Anglo-Saxonists have chosen to align themselves with the Anglo-Saxons, and they construct their identity through the act of studying and appropriating Old English literature. There are a variety of routes the creation can take, and different scholars use different ways of constructing their identities. The most direct, but also most politically sensitive, is to use the texts as a basis for an “English” identity separate from those other national identities of the United Kingdom: the Scots, the Welsh and the Irish. Another way is to focus on expressions of religion in the texts, pagan or Christian, and thus align the texts with a readily identifiable identity. Some scholars turn to a continuing heritage of English literature, locating themselves at the end of an unbroken line of influence. Other critics construct their identities through rejection and dissociation, through alterity. Rather than identifying themselves with the Anglo-Saxons, they read them as an other that by default will define themselves.

In their studies and their various approaches these Anglo-Saxonists create their own Anglo-Saxon societies. This should not be considered a flaw in their scholarship, nor should such an approach to scholarship be assumed to be restricted to Old English research. As John Niles points out in his discussion of appropriations and historiography, what actually happened is of less importance than what people believe happened and what it means to them.¹²¹ We will never know exactly what the poems were intended to mean, we can only make educated guesses, but of an equal interest is what the poems mean to a contemporary reader. Those meanings are reflected in the projection of professional affinities and affiliations, which is what makes literary studies, and Old English studies in particular, such a fascinating field of research.

¹¹⁹ Alexander “The Cult of Anglo-Saxon” 13.

¹²⁰ Alexander 8.

¹²¹ Niles 220.

Chapter Four: Metaphoric and Metonymic readings

Closing or opening the system

In this chapter I investigate the way critics use metonymic or metaphoric approaches when they read and interpret Old English poetry. The image of the use of metaphor and metonymy in interpretations of Old English poetry can be constructed in several different ways. We can see it chronologically, with metaphor the preferred method of scholars, stretching into the second half of the twentieth century. With the advent of postmodernism and new theories of literary criticism, metonymy enters into Old English studies, albeit at a rather slow pace.

Another way of looking at the approaches is to say that metaphor is about organising the material in a hierarchical way, of finding a framework into which the individual texts can be placed, and of finding a way to resolve the meaning of the poems as well as the intention of the poet. Metonymy, on the other hand is about studying the details, letting them lead in expected or unexpected directions, allowing gaps and contradictions to exist, as well as allowing several different meanings to interact and co-exist in an anamorphous relationship.

A feature of the tradition of Old English research has been the application of metaphoric readings to Old English texts. Metaphoric readings are well suited to a mode of research that has its roots in philology, with its insistence on fixed, “scientific” explanations of the texts. Not only are the grammar, prosody and other aspects of the form of the poems expected to be accounted for, but also the meaning is expected to be determined and settled. It has been suggested that the reluctance by scholars of Old English, as well as Early Welsh, poetry, to try new literary theories is grounded in the insistence that before such approaches are tried the meaning of the texts must be established. An example of this insistence is the sentiment that “the critic’s comments can scarcely be considered relevant until he has discovered why the poems were composed.”¹ Scholars applying metaphoric readings to Old English poetry thus argue for a deferral of literary interpretations of the poems until meaning has been established. Meaning will be established through in-depth studies of form. It should be noted, however, at this point, that a thorough knowledge of philology does not necessarily mean that the scholar applies a metaphoric approach to the texts. Critics who use metaphor tend to do so with the aid of philological tools, but one does not infallibly lead to the other.

Anglo-Saxonist scholarship has been, and possibly still is, mainly concerned with the solution of *crucēs*.² The *crux* usually appears in the form of a problem within

¹ Morton W. Bloomfield and Charles W. Dunn, “Primal Poetry and the Modern Audience,” *The Role of the Poet in Early Societies* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1989) 159.

² Frantzen *Desire* 178.

the actual manuscript, a word missing or misspelled, or other perceived irregularities. The crux is always seen as a *problem*, something that must be solved and overcome. Other kinds of cruces appear when the texts do not meet the expectations of the scholars. These cruces have been referred to as perceived “aesthetic defects.”³ One expectation common to many editors and readers of *Beowulf* is that it should be an epic. In the places where the poem falls short of this expectation, cruces appear. As regards *Wife* and *Wulf*, the lack of a clear meaning and of names and situations becomes a crux for the metaphorically-oriented scholar. The existence of conflicting interpretations becomes “critical confusion;”⁴ one scholar is “dismayed” by the plethora of interpretations engendered by *Wulf*.⁵ Some scholars express annoyance or what almost seems to be unease at the thought of “unsolved” texts.⁶ These scholars then try to find a way of making the texts settle down, what Allen Frantzen refers to as “calling a halt to the interplay of signs and sign systems,” which to him is “‘death’ in the text.” He claims that for scholars using the approach I call metaphorical, “art must die in order that criticism, so to speak, may live,” a rather harsh characterisation.⁷ It is evident, however, in many metaphoric readings, that the need for closure overrides other concerns about the poems. It is only when looking at the poems from a metaphoric point of view that a critic can claim that a text “suffers from too many interpretations.”⁸

Metonymic readings, on the other hand, welcome a multitude of interpretations, since they are less concerned with finding a “solution” to a “problem.” Metonymically-orientated scholars are also interested in knowing what the poems are about, of course, but they are more prepared to allow for multiple meanings, open-ended readings which do not privilege one interpretation over another. Scott DeGregorio, who has studied the use of irony in *Beowulf*, states that irony can function as “a dynamic oscillation between the said and the unsaid which encourages us to see ironic meaning as the unresolved interplay *between* different meanings.”⁹ Likewise, a deferral of meaning, or an anamorphous oscillation between more than one possible solution, can allow the reader a fuller experience of the poems. Metonymic readings, as opposed to metaphoric ones, take the effect of the poems on the contemporary reader into consideration. As Sarah Higley says: we must realise “that thoughtful critical and even aesthetic response to mysterious texts is and remains relevant.”¹⁰

From my discussions so far it can seem that metaphor and metonymy form a diametrically-opposed pair, where one excludes the use of the other. This need not necessarily be the case. A scholar can prefer one or the other mode as a general ap-

³ Frantzen *Desire* 179.

⁴ Johnson, “The Narrative Structure of ‘The Wife’s Lament’ ” 498.

⁵ Leslie Whitbread, “A Note on *Wulf* and *Eadwacer*,” *Medium Ævum* 10 (1941) 150-154, 150.

⁶ See, for example, Orton; Giles; Baker.

⁷ Frantzen *Desire* 190.

⁸ Mandel 149.

⁹ Scott DeGregorio, “Theorizing Irony in *Beowulf*: The Case of Hrothgar,” *Exemplaria* 11.2 (1999) 309-343, 313. Original emphasis.

¹⁰ Sarah Higley, *Between Languages: The Uncooperative Text in Early Welsh and Old English Nature Poetry* (University Park, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993) 11.

proach to Old English studies, but still make use of the other in single instances. For the purposes of this thesis, however, I have chosen to concentrate on the more clear-cut cases.

Metaphoric readings of *Wife* and *Wulf*

Search for related texts

One example of the metaphoric mode of providing closure to the study of the poems is the attempt to provide a fixed framework, a background for the texts. This way of reading construes *Wife* and *Wulf* as fragments or elaborations of sections of well-known stories, song cycles, or groups of sagas. This background will then provide names for the nameless women of the poems and explain the puzzling situations they find themselves in. Through this action interpretation is foreclosed; the reader is not invited to form her or his own opinion of the poems.

The expression “related texts” used in the heading above refers to both sources and analogues. Some scholars look for a source for the poems in order to be able to name the characters and explain their motivations and actions. The scholars see the texts as standing in a metaphoric relationship, where similarity is the most important factor, and where one text determines and fixes the meaning of the other, placing them in a hierarchical relationship. Thus *Wulf* is not really a poem called *Wulf*, but a fragment of a known, or lost text, which provides its meaning, its *raison d’être*. Frequently the Germanic background of the Anglo-Saxons is highlighted in this kind of research on *Wife* and *Wulf*. Norse poetry, Eddic and continental Germanic texts are often looked to as means of resolving the texts. Sometimes this action is labelled as an “identification,” suggesting that the “value” of the poems lies in finding out where they belong.¹¹ Attention is not given to the poem and its voice, but only to its possible provenance. Content becomes less important than pedigree.

Among the suggested identifications of *Wulf* we find, for example, the continental Odoacer cycle¹² and the Wolfdietrich story.¹³ The one that has turned out to be the most long-lived, however, is the Norse *Volsungasaga*. One of the first identifications with this story was postulated by William Schofield in 1902.¹⁴ The metaphoric need for resolution and fixed meanings may be illustrated by the genesis of Schofield’s article. He was approached by W. W. Lawrence, who hoped that Schofield would be able to help him find the Old Norse text Lawrence believed must be the source of *Wulf*. Schofield tellingly claims that

[i]t was my fortune to make what I believe scholars will agree to be the correct identification of the material, and, with the new light thus thrown

¹¹ See, for example, *ASPR* on *Wulf*, lvi.

¹² Rudolf Immelmann, *Die altenglische Odoaker-Dichtung* (Berlin: Verlag von Julius Springer, 1907).

¹³ L. L. Schücking, *Kleines angelsächsisches Dichterbuch*. *ASPR* lvi.

¹⁴ William Henry Schofield, “Signy’s Lament,” *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 17 (1902) 262-295.

on its meaning, to interpret the poem more satisfactorily, I think, than has hitherto been done.¹⁵

In this quotation Schofield expresses a number of the desires of metaphoric studies. He looks for the origin of the text, believes in a fixed, correct answer to the problem that the text constitutes and believes that his findings will lead to a satisfying interpretation of the poem. In this he is, of course, very much of his time, but it is interesting how much of this legacy still influences studies of *Wulf* and *Wife*. The search for origins is visibly linked to Schofield's undertakings. He is not only trying to identify the source of *Wulf*, but he is also trying to find evidence for a literary exchange between Anglo-Saxons and Scandinavians which will thus establish closer links between the two cultures. It is his belief that if such a link could be found it would also shed "new light on the vexed questions of the home and nature of the Eddic poems and of the *Volsungasaga*."¹⁶ In this line of research there is a risk that the poem itself becomes less important than the need to find its source, and its meaning is only interesting inasmuch as it can be pinned down satisfactorily.

Amongst the scholars who have followed Schofield's suggested identification are Carol Hough and Richard North.¹⁷ Hough has scrutinised the refrain in *Wulf*, particularly the line *Ungelice is us*, and suggests a reading that deviates from the usual interpretations. She argues that it should not be taken to mean 'it is different for us' but rather "We ... are too much the same."¹⁸ Hough then proceeds to look for a context where this statement would fit, and settles upon Schofield's suggestion. She sees the speaker as Signy, lamenting that as lovers, she and Sigfrid, brother and sister, are too alike. North has studied the poem from a metrical point of view and argues that it is composed in Norse metre. This, in conjunction with a vocabulary he maintains has Norse features, leads him to postulate that the text is based on a Norse story. The one he finds most compelling is the *Volsungasaga*.

Other Norse sources that have been drawn on are, for example, *Gunnlaugs saga* and *Finnboga saga*. One scholar who has used these texts is J. A. Tasioulas.¹⁹ She argues that the poem is not about the relationship between adults, but a mother grieving for her child, Wulf, who has been left to die. To support this theory, she draws on *The Penitential of Theodore* and the law of Ine of Wessex, two texts that condemn infanticide. There does not exist an Anglo-Saxon tradition of stories of infanticide through exposure, so Tasioulas derives most support from sources outside the Anglo-Saxon sphere: Finnish poetry and Icelandic sagas. Her main argument is based on *Gunnlaugs saga*, where a husband states that if his wife gives birth to a girl, the child

¹⁵ Schofield 262.

¹⁶ Schofield 272.

¹⁷ Carole Hough, "Wulf and Eadwacer: a Note on Ungelic"; Richard North, "Metre and Meaning in Wulf and Eadwacer: Signy Reconsidered."

¹⁸ Hough 5.

¹⁹ J. A. Tasioulas, "The Mother's Lament: Wulf and Eadwacer Reconsidered," *Medium Ævum* LXV.1 (1996) 1-18.

must be exposed, as well as *Finnboga saga*, where Ásbjorn commands his wife to expose the expected child, no matter what the sex.²⁰

Wife has also had its share of proposed sources. These include the Latin stories of Genoveva,²¹ Crescentia²² and Constance.²³ What these studies have in common is an assumption that accusations of adultery or witchcraft have been levelled against the narrator by her husband's kinsmen, a theme that we see recurring in later interpretations.²⁴ Another identification has been with Germanic folk tales that ultimately go back to ancient Greece. Robert P. Fitzgerald has suggested that *Wife* is an Anglo-Saxon version of the tale of Cupid and Psyche.²⁵ Fitzgerald states that the tale of Cupid and Psyche, catalogued as Aa 425, is one of the most widespread folktales in existence. Yet there exist no Old English versions of it that he may refer to. Instead he turns to such treatments of it as Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale*. Because of its cryptic nature, it is possible for Fitzgerald to fit *Wife* into the narrative framework of Aa 425. What is most interesting in the context of our discussion, however, is that he argues that his proposed reading "resolves ... thorny problems,"²⁶ that is, the interpretation and meaning of the "problem" are of less concern than the smoothing out of "problems" in the text.

Norse sources have also been used as a context for *Wife*. Suggested sources have been, for example, *Guðrunarkviða*²⁷ and *Skírnismál*.²⁸ In his reading of *Wife*, Peter R. Orton uses the same vocabulary as many other critics who favour a metaphorical approach. He claims that the critical discussion during the 1960s concerning the sex and vital status of the narrator "diverted attention from other *problems* of interpretation ... which remain *unresolved*."²⁹ As for many other scholars who locate the poem within a Germanic tradition, it is the fact that the narrator resides under an oak which forms the nexus of Orton's interpretation. Orton cannot find any reason within Anglo-Saxon culture or its texts to explain why the narrator resides in a cave under an oak, so he turns to *Skírnismál* for an explanation. He reads *Skírnismál* and *Wife* as related versions of a postulated text that has its origins on the Baltic coast in the early fifth century, which depicts a ritualistic wedding between earth and sky.

²⁰ Tasioulas 5.

²¹ Christian W. M. Grein, *Bibliothek der angelsächsischen Poesie in kritisch bearbeiteten Texten und mit vollständigen Glossar* herausgegeben von C. W. M. G. (Göttingen: Cassel, 1857) 363.

²² Svetislav Stefanović, "Das angelsächsische Gedicht *Die Klage der Frau*," *Anglia* 32 (1909) 398-433.

²³ Edith Rickert, "The Old English Offa Saga," *Modern Philology* 2 (1904-5) 29-76, 321-76.

²⁴ Thomas Davis, for example, suggests witchcraft, whereas Elinor Lench and Douglas Short postulate adultery. Douglas D. Short, "The Old English Wife's Lament," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 71 (1970) 585-603.

²⁵ Robert P. Fitzgerald, "The Wife's Lament and The Search for the Lost Husband," *Journal of English and German Philology* 62 (1963) 769-77.

²⁶ Fitzgerald 777.

²⁷ Alain Renoir, "A Reading context for *The Wife's Lament*," *Anglo-Saxon Poetry: Essays in Appreciation for John C. McGalliard* ed. Lewis E. Nicholson, Dolores Warwick Frese and John C. Gerber (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1975) 224-41.

²⁸ Peter R. Orton, "The Wife's Lament and *Skírnismál*: Some Parallels," *Dolum til Dala: Gudbrandur Vigufsson Centenary Essays* ed. Rory W. McTurk and Andrew Wawn (Leeds: Leeds Studies in English, 1989) 205-237.

²⁹ Orton 205. My emphasis.

Skírnismál is the older text, closer to the original version, Orton suggests. *Wife*, which does not exhibit any overtly heathen elements, he regards as a version where the original meaning has been lost and the supernatural nature of the participants has been transformed.

Orton does not allow the texts to cross-fertilise. He uses the description of the threatened imprisonment of the giantess Gerðr in *Skírnismál* to explain the imprisonment of the narrator of *Wife*, but he does not read the texts reciprocally. The texts do not illuminate each other, it is only *Skírnismál* that illuminates *Wife*. Their relationship is unequal, in that *Skírnismál* defines *Wife*, is placed in a higher hierarchical position *vis-à-vis* *Wife*.

Not only Norse texts, but continental Germanic texts, such as the *Hildebrandslied*, *Waldere* and the *Nibelungenlied*, often serve as additional source material as well, and sometimes no distinction is made between the texts as regards the time and place of their composition.³⁰ In their metaphoric eagerness to find a source and a solution to the poems, scholars run the risk of treating all the material as principally the same text, and if no supporting evidence can be found in the literary output from one country, evidence from another may suffice. The stories scholars turn to are similar to some extent, and it appears that they were known in several countries, but attributing such “open” and indeterminate texts as *Wife* and *Wulf* to these sources in some instances necessitates a rather long leap of faith.

Germanic or Norse sources are not only used to identify the underlying story of the poems but are also used as circumstantial evidence when there is not enough Anglo-Saxon material to be found. One example is the recurring postulation that Wulf is an outlaw and that the *hwelp* is his son, who is given that epithet because of his father’s status. Since there is no evidence that outlaws were referred to as wolves or that their sons were referred to as whelps or cubs,³¹ scholars have turned to external sources for support. Phillip Pulsiano and Kirsten Wolf have used texts such as *Grágás* or the poem *Sigrdrífumál* in the *Elder Edda* to support their argument that Wulf is an outlaw, and that the *earmne hwelp* is his son.³² Pulsiano and Wolf refer to Dorothy Whitelock’s statement that the Anglo-Saxons claimed that an outlaw was referred to as a “wolf’s head,” but they acknowledge that we do not know where she found the evidence for this. In fact, they state unequivocally that “[n]owhere in the Anglo-Saxon law codes do we find any reference to the son of an outlaw being called a ‘hwelp.’”³³ Instead they turn to Old Norse literature and law as a means of “resolving the debate.” Whilst at the same time stating that they are not proposing an Old Norse model for *Wulf*, they claim that Old Norse documents can be used for “solving the meaning of the *hwelp*.”³⁴ These documents include *Grágás*, the name given to the laws of the Icelandic Commonwealth, where the son of an outlaw is called a *vargdropi* ‘wolf’s cub.’

³⁰ Renoir “Context.”

³¹ See Stanley “Wolf! My Wolf!”

³² Phillip Pulsiano and Kirsten Wolf, “The ‘Hwelp’ in *Wulf and Eadwacer*,” *English Language Notes* XXVIII.3 (1991) 1-9.

³³ Pulsiano and Wolf 3.

³⁴ Pulsiano and Wolf 2.

The word *vargdropi* also occurs in the poem *Sigrdrífumál*, and it is this word that they bring to bear on the *hwelp* of *Wulf*. Pulsiano and Wolf compare their interpretation with those of other critics and claim that theirs is the best reading since it does not strain or violate the text. It does, however, place it in a dependant relationship to later Norse texts, which are used to define the Old English poem.

It should be noted that sources and context are useful and necessary tools for the scholar studying literary texts. They help the scholar to create meaning in the text and offer ways of enriching the interpretation. When used in a metaphoric way, however, they can become ways of fixing the text. As we have seen, a metaphoric use of sources places texts in a hierarchical relationship, privileging one text over another, concentrating solely on the influence of one text on another. Seeing parallels between two texts of different cultures and periods can be a way of enhancing the richness of the reading of both. However, when a Norse text is claimed as the only possible background to an Old English poem, and names are given to characters who are nameless in the Old English text, it limits the possibilities of interpretation and halts the interplay of varying readings. The poem ceases to be a poem: it becomes a variant of another text, without any intrinsic value. To provide it with a precedent is to try and pin the text down, to fix its meaning once and for all and, in my opinion, to lessen the impact of the text.

Substitution of cultures

As I have mentioned earlier, the metaphoric reading presupposes an absolute identification between different cultures, religions, texts etc., where one thing can function as a substitute for another. To give an example of such an approach, I will once again return to the research carried out by Hawkes and Wells concerning a cemetery in Hampshire. We have previously looked at their research from the point of view of identity construction, but now we will look at their approach to their sources: an approach I regard as metaphoric. Hawkes and Wells assume a direct interchangeability between customs and documents of different periods and places. They refer to the laws of Æthelbert, Alfred and Cnut, although those laws were implemented in regions and ages different from the period they are concerned with. Æthelbert, who is closest in time to the sixth century cemetery, ruling between 602-603, reigned in Kent, some distance away from the Hampshire location of the excavation. Alfred ruled in Wessex between 871-899 and Cnut ruled more or less all of England 1020-1023. These laws can therefore only give circumstantial information about practices in pagan sixth century Hampshire.

A similar conflation but on a larger scale occurs when the pre-Christian beliefs of the Anglo-Saxons are discussed. As mentioned previously, we have no immediate access to the religion of the Anglo-Saxons, but scholars working in a metaphoric vein tend to assume that Germanic, Norse and Anglo-Saxon religious beliefs were so similar as to be interchangeable. This assumption then forms the basis of interpretations of Old English texts. This is evidenced in the work of Raymond Tripp Jr. His

interest lies in manifestations of the occult in Old English texts. I have already discussed his article “The Narrator as Revenant” in chapter three. Tripp returns to *Wife* in a later article, where he discusses the familiar crux of the narrator’s abode.³⁵ In this article he maintains that the poem can be explained by the use of Norse sources describing the actions and power of Odin. In *Baldrs Draumar* Odin has the power to raise the dead. In *Hardbarðzljóð* Odin refers to graves as “the woods at home.” In *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks konungs* the waking of the dead is phrased as a command that those who sleep underneath tree roots should wake up.³⁶ These Norse instances of ghosts living in graves under trees are used by Tripp to support the claim that the *Wife* is a ghost and that *Wife* is a death-song. It is evident that Tripp assumes the worship of and traditions surrounding the Norse Odin to be interchangeable with those of the Anglo-Saxon Woden. This conflation of cultures also allows Tripp to make use of a genre not found in Old English texts, but prevalent in Norse, that of the death-song.

The death-song is a concept used by William Johnson as well; he too sees an interchangeability between Anglo-Saxon and Norse cultural beliefs.³⁷ As mentioned before, Johnson relies on Nora Chadwick’s claim that the death-chant was known to all the Teutonic peoples;³⁸ a claim which allows him to maintain that the death-song was known to the Anglo-Saxons. Johnson mentions that the Anglo-Saxon death-songs are sung at the point of death, but maintains that sometimes the singer performs them after death, “as a *draugr* within the barrow.”³⁹ *Draugr* is, of course, a Norse word, which highlights the difficulties that Johnson encounters with his argument. There are no Old English instances of death-songs performed after the death of the subject. Instead he turns to *Helgakviða Hundingsbana*, *Guðrunarhvat* and *Helreið Brynhildar* for supporting instances. He makes clear that the lack of information in *Wife*, no names, no explanation of the events, makes it impossible to draw “point-for-point parallels”⁴⁰ with the Eddic texts, but still argues that *Wife* is an Old English death-song. This suggests that to Johnson Norse and Old English texts are so close culturally as to be interchangeable: one can function as a substitute for the other when supporting material is sought.

Peter R. Orton also reads Norse and Old English literature as being so close to each other as to be interchangeable. In his article on *Wife* and *Skírnismál* Orton refers to his reading as a study of “some parallels” and he points out that stylistically there can be no textual relationship between the two texts. As regards content the two stories also differ on a number of points. Yet, despite all these differences he argues for “some kind of historical, genetic connection,”⁴¹ that is, Orton cannot allow the texts to stand in any relationship that is not genetic. There must be a common background, he

³⁵ Raymond P. Tripp, Jr., “Odin’s Power and the Old English Elegies,” *The Old English Elegies: New Essays in Criticism and Research* ed. Martin Green (London: Associated University Presses, 1983) 57-68.

³⁶ Tripp 58-59.

³⁷ Johnson, “*The Wife’s Lament* as Death-Song.”

³⁸ Her examples are two sections of *Beowulf* and a text by Bede. Johnson 80 n. 16.

³⁹ Johnson 73.

⁴⁰ Johnson 74.

⁴¹ Orton “*The Wife’s Lament* and *Skírnismál*: Some Parallels” 219.

argues, and he attempts to “identify the origin”⁴² of the similarities between the texts. In his identification of the origin, he makes claims that the Anglo-Saxons worshipped some of the same gods as the Norse, and attributed some of the same characteristics to them. He admits that there is no evidence that they shared their worldview, but still argues that it was probably similar enough to warrant the interpretation he suggests. In fact, his reading hinges on the Anglo-Saxons recognising the oak under which the Wife lives as Yggdrasil, and her cave as a version of the Norse Hel. These allusions would be transparent to the Anglo-Saxons, according to Orton, since the cultures, he argues, not only share a common past, but are still so close that they can substitute for each other.

The use of external sources is, of course, a commonplace in Old English studies, and does not in itself necessitate a metaphoric reading. Likewise, an acknowledgment that Anglo-Saxon culture had ties to Germanic culture, and that certain traits seem to be echoed in Norse literature, does not constitute a metaphoric approach to Old English literature. The readings investigated here, however, tend to see the cultures not only as cognates, sharing a common ancestry, but so similar as to make no difference. It is assumed that religious and cultural beliefs, as well as literary genres, are the same within the different cultures, and so they can be used as substitutes for each other. If there is no evidence in Old English literature for a belief in corporeal ghosts speaking from the grave, evidence, we have seen, can be taken from Norse texts. If there are no Old English legal texts suggesting that the child of an outlaw is called a cub, support can be drawn from Icelandic law. This approach forecloses the choices a reader can make and limits the number of variant interpretations that can be enjoyed. A metonymic mode of reading texts forces the text to settle down and reduces the impact of the text on the reader.

Metonymic readings of *Wife* and *Wulf*

Cross-cultural interpretations

The critical work described in the preceding section is motivated by a metaphoric need for “exact” matches. There also exists critical work carried out in a metonymic mode, where scholars juxtapose Old English poetry with texts that cannot be identical, and at the same time cannot function as substitutes. Examples of these are, for instance, texts that were written later, or in a culture and a language that were not accessible to the Anglo-Saxons. These texts stand in a contiguous relationship with the Old English texts, sharing boundaries, touching on points of ideas and themes, but cannot be placed in a hierarchy, cannot show influence.

As we saw in chapter three, Peter Dronke draws parallels between Old English and Early Welsh poetry. He is not alone in this. Scholars have long been aware of the

⁴² Orton 224.

similarities in mood and imagery between Welsh and Old English texts.⁴³ Yet scholars investigating these texts have often concentrated on the similarities to the exclusion of the differences, postulating cultural influence or a similar generic origin to explain those similarities. These scholars demand a perfect match, where one item can replace another, and where there are differences they smooth them over or try to erase them.

Scholars working in a metonymic vein, however, investigate themes in Old English, Early Welsh and Irish poetry, and allow cross-fertilisation to enrich their interpretations of all three sets of texts. Issues of directions of influence, precedence or antiquity are not dealt with, being of less importance than the opportunity of viewing the Old English and other texts from new angles, driven by new impulses.

A very interesting attempt at allowing Old English and Early Welsh literature to illuminate each other has been undertaken by Sarah Higley. Like other scholars working in a metonymic mode, she resists and rejects the “deep-seated modern desire to correct the unintelligible and the unconnected.” Her stated goal is “to see difficulty as the norm instead of the anomaly.”⁴⁴ In her metonymic enterprise she does not privilege one group of texts over the other, but makes the reader aware that the Welsh literature has been read through an anglocentric filter, which tries to make “the same” what is different, and that “[i]mportant differences have collapsed in the search for sameness.” She uses *anglocentric* in this context to mean, not writing in English, but a mode or research that “assumes that the norm in poetry lies in clarity, explicitness...seamlessness...clear opening and closure,” and which rejects “opacity, implicitness...omissions...disruption of chronology.”⁴⁵ Higley draws attention to the many features that the Welsh poetry shares with the Old English elegies, but she also points out that it is important not to lose sight of the differences between the two groups of poetry. She makes use of the similarities and differences in her work, rather than regarding them as obstacles, when she juxtaposes the two traditions so that they can illuminate each other: “hearing both together we might detect harmonies or dissonances that go unheard in isolation.”

Higley’s study is divided into three sections, dealing with the notion of “connection” from different angles. In each section she compares Old English poems with Early Welsh texts, and in the context of what she terms the “natural analogy,” the idea that there is a “universal link between the physical world and a state of mind,” she juxtaposes *Wife* with *Claf Abercuawg*, as well as Middle English and Japanese texts. What these texts all have in common, although executed differently, is a narrator whose sorrow is echoed by nature. The texts are not presented in a hierarchical relationship, but differences as well as similarities are discussed and allowed to illuminate each other.

A scholar who explicitly works with *Wife* in comparison with a Welsh text is Dorothy Ann Bray. She has elected to study *Wife* together with the Welsh *Heledd*-poems, not for evidence of cross-cultural influences, but “to look at two women’s situa-

⁴³ For a list of names and titles, see Sarah L. Higley, *Between Languages* 9.

⁴⁴ For this section I am relying on pages 3-26 of Higley’s study.

⁴⁵ Higley 10.

tions in the context of two similar heroic cultures.”⁴⁶ Bray points to similarities between the speakers of both poems: they have lost a dear person who is also a protector, and both women mix in their speech words of a personal nature with words of public position when referring to their lost ones. Bray also points to an interesting possibility: Irish and Welsh poetry use a trope where the poet creates a female persona standing in an erotic social relationship with his lord. Bray suggests an interpretation of *Wife* using the same trope, which would account for the mixing of terms for ‘husband’ with those of ‘lord.’ Bray suggests that the poet’s use of a female persona, in the voice of Heledd and the Wife, might be a way for the poet to lament, and at the same time criticise, heroic society. Like many other scholars, Bray argues that Welsh and Anglo-Saxon society deemed it fitting that mourning should be expressed by women, and she argues that both Heledd and the Wife show the effects of a martial society on those who are not warriors. In an interesting attempt to reconcile the seemingly disparate worlds of heroic society and women, Bray argues that since the poems spoken by Heledd and the Wife show the reverse side of heroic society, they are a type of heroic literature. As we shall see in chapter five, some feminist scholars have had difficulties accommodating the idea of Anglo-Saxon society as heroic because they reason that this would exclude women. Bray’s argument is a way of incorporating the two components, women and heroism, into a working relationship.

Bray’s study allows both poems to illuminate the role of the poet and to deepen the view of martial society, without making any claims of influence or precedence.⁴⁷ Rather, she points to affinities born out of similar societal structures that can be made to enrich both poems and offer new viewpoints.

Wife has been studied in conjunction with Irish literature as well. Daniel F. Melia has, like Bray, explored the idea that the poet as a female persona stands in an erotic relationship to his lord. As a Celticist, he offers reasons why Old English literature should be read through medieval Celtic literature: the scant surviving Old English material needs, in his opinion, to be read through outside parallels, and the social structure of medieval Ireland and Wales shared many of the features that distinguished Anglo-Saxon society, for example that of a “tribal shame society.”⁴⁸ Like Bray, Melia points out that he is not arguing for influences, since there has not been “any substantial interpenetration of Old English and Early Irish culture in the historical period.”⁴⁹ Instead he argues for affinities based on similar societal structures and the presence of a class of trained poets attached to noblemen. Melia reads *Wife* as a parallel to the Irish poem *Féuch féin*. What connects these two poems, he states, is allegory. He suggests an allegorical, rather than a religious, reading of the Irish text, which is “one fitted entirely into the context of this world and contrasting the lesser

⁴⁶ Dorothy Ann Bray, “A Woman’s Loss and Lamentation: Heledd’s Song and *The Wife’s Lament*,” *Neophilologus* 79.1 (1995) 145-54, 147.

⁴⁷ She states that her study “is not an attempt to produce cross-cultural influences.” 147.

⁴⁸ Daniel F. Melia, “An Odd but Celtic Way of Looking at Old English Elegy,” *Connections between Old English and Medieval Celtic Literature* ed. Patrick K. Ford and Karen G. Borst (Lanham: University Presses of America, 1985) 8-30, 8.

⁴⁹ Melia 14.

but stronger emotions of personal feelings with the greater but weaker ones of social responsibility.”⁵⁰ It is the allegorical style that allows Melia to compare the two texts, although there is a “lack of exact correspondence”⁵¹ between the Irish and Old English text, since allegory and personification were, he maintains, favoured tropes in Old English literature.

Another way of interpreting both *Wife* and *Wulf* in a metonymic way is to see them as *Frauenlieder* or “women’s songs.” I touched briefly upon this genre as used in identity construction in the previous chapter, and I will discuss the studies of *Frauenlieder* in greater detail in the next chapter, but here I will mention them in conjunction with metonymic interpretations.

The aspect of the proposed genre of *Frauenlieder* that is most interesting in this context is the metonymic relationship between the poems of different ages and places. There can be no question of direct influence, or a possibility of metaphoric substitution between the poems seen as belonging to this genre, since the texts span a great range in time and space: from ancient Egypt to China, including poetry in Portuguese, Serbian, Greek and Provençal.⁵² The objections raised against this proposed genre are precisely that of influence. Because the poets could not have influenced each other, the poems do not stand in a hierarchical relationship, which is what characterises a genre from a metaphorical point of view. Scholars such as Kemp Malone suggest, however, that there exists an “international framework of lyric poetry”⁵³ which expresses universal emotions held by different peoples at different times and places. The poems stand in a kind of contiguous relationship to each other; they are separated in time and place yet they share common ground in modes of expression and themes. Although the poems are different, they are also reminiscent of each other, and to juxtapose them is to allow them to interact and illuminate each other, thus giving the reader a greater understanding of their complexity.

As we can see from the examples given in this section, scholars working in a metonymic mode are less constrained by the uncertainties and questions that Old English poetry presents than those working in a metaphoric mode. The metonymic scholars do not look for an “exact correspondence” between texts and periods, but allow for a deferral of resolution. They follow the meaning of metonymy as outlined by Overing: “the textual practice of looking at details, and of refraining from composing them into unified pictures...the resistance to closure [and] resolution.”⁵⁴

It may seem at times that there is little difference between metaphoric and metonymic approaches to Old English literature. Both may use outside texts from other cultures. The difference, however, is that a metaphoric reading approaches a poem as a problem that needs to be solved. Ambiguities are treated as flaws that need to be corrected. A metaphoric reading claims to be able to show which other texts and poets influenced the composer of the text in question, and claims to be able to decide the

⁵⁰ Melia 19.

⁵¹ Melia 18.

⁵² Kemp Malone, “Two English *Frauenlieder*,” *Comparative Literature* XIV (1962) 106-117, 107.

⁵³ Spitzer, “The Mozarabic Lyric and Theodor Frings’ Theories” 4.

⁵⁴ Overing 6.

meaning of the “original” poem, to be able to establish what the text meant to its audience. It places texts in a hierarchical relationship where one is privileged over another, where one text is used to define the meaning of the other. A metonymic approach, on the other hand, will state that no lines of influence are sought. The reading produced is not intended to be definitive. No text is privileged over another: instead the texts are juxtaposed so that they illuminate each other and cross-fertilisation is actively sought. Ambiguities are not only tolerated but actively encouraged, since metonymy resists closure and resolution. Different interpretations are allowed to interact and co-exist in an anamorphous relationship. A metonymic reading will simply be less definitive than a metaphoric one, since metonymy focuses on the process of construction of meaning rather than on a fixed solution.

Chapter Five: Feminist Studies

In the two preceding chapters I have looked at how scholars construct their professional identity and how they approach the poems in metaphoric or metonymic ways. In this chapter I will bring these concepts together and apply them to feminist studies within Old English literature, investigating how feminist scholars negotiate their identities and use metaphor or metonymy in their research.

Feminism in medieval studies

Feminist research in Old English studies has, to a great extent, grown out of a resistance towards a male-centred worldview that one might call, for want of a better word, masculinist.¹ Old English research has been until fairly recently, and to some extent still is, based on the idea of man as norm.² In the words of Gayle Greene and Coppélia Kahn, “a male perspective, assumed to be ‘universal’ has dominated fields of knowledge, shaping their paradigms and methods.”³ Masculinist scholars, as I will call them,⁴ have a man-centred worldview: they see man as the norm in their own society. They carry this worldview with them in their research, that is, they assume that the masculinist attitude towards women in their society was also embraced by the societies they study. The masculinist worldview has for a long time remained unquestioned by Anglo-Saxonists, and the research carried out by masculinist scholars is often taken to be objective. The division of the Anglo-Saxon population into “the people” and “their women,” which can be found particularly in pre-twentieth century research, is not addressed by the scholars, but is regarded as quite natural.

The masculinist scholars often espouse a Whig view of history which also includes an elitist view of society. This way of regarding history entails the notion that it is men who drive history forwards, and the particular men who drive it are the aristocrats, hence the scholars’ particular interest in kings and bishops.⁵ Women are of little or no importance, unless they are among the few exceptions, aristocratic women who rule a region or become learned abbesses. We see the masculinist worldview ex-

¹ As Helen Bennett has expressed it: “we speak of feminist criticism but have no widely accepted equivalent to name the inescapable genderedness of the masculine perspective.” “Exile and the Semiosis of Gender in Old English Elegies,” *Class and Gender in Early English Literature: Intersections* ed. J. Britton Harwood and Gillian R. Overing (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994) 43-58, 44.

² This is, of course, not unique to Old English studies. Many scholars have reacted against the preoccupation within many disciplines with “dwem,” Dead White European Men.

³ Gayle Greene and Coppélia Kahn, “Feminist Scholarship and the Social Construction of Woman,” *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism* ed. Gayle Greene and Coppélia Kahn (London: Methuen, 1985) 1-36, 1-2.

⁴ A masculinist worldview is, of course, not restricted to male scholars.

⁵ Frantzen has commented on the “focus on aristocratic culture” within Old English studies, and points out that it has also been dominant within other fields of research, such as medieval French studies. “Prologue” 8.

emplified in twentieth century studies of Anglo-Saxon society and its women as well.⁶ When women are studied by masculinist scholars, they are regarded as appendages whose actions are “tolerated” by their society, that is, the men. One example of this attitude is when English chroniclers are noted for their “casual acceptance” of women’s activities outside the home, and for not being surprised when a woman is, for example, learned.⁷ It is regarded as commendable that Anglo-Saxon society “allowed” women freedom of intervention in public affairs.⁸ There is often an air of surprise surrounding masculinist work on Anglo-Saxon women and their society: a surprise that the women were not viewed in the same way as classical Roman women and post-Conquest English women, as if the Anglo-Saxon women are deviating from a universal norm. Scholars with a masculinist worldview study the importance of women in Anglo-Saxon society,⁹ but it is all discussed in terms of how much freedom of action the men “allow” the women to have; it is rarely considered that the women may have held a central, independent role in their society.

Since man is regarded as the norm, interests perceived as “manly” are the ones studied by the masculinist scholars. As Old English literature is supposedly the mirror of Anglo-Saxon society, it is the manly aspects of the literature that scholars have focused on. We see that during the late nineteenth century and a large part of the twentieth, Old English literature has been regarded as above all heroic in motivation and outlook,¹⁰ celebrating male values of bravery and loyalty, and the role investigated by the scholars is that of the hero, in the guise of the warrior, the king and the male saint. The text that has generated more research than any other is *Beowulf*. The aspects that scholars have concentrated on are homosocial relationships between men: that between the individual retainer and his lord, and between the *comitatus* and the chieftain.¹¹ Another text that has been studied extensively is *The Battle of Maldon*, which supposedly displays an Anglo-Saxon warrior ethic: men dying for their lord in battle rather than returning home in shame.¹²

Scholars have constructed Anglo-Saxon society as heroic and warlike, with very little space allowed for women to act, thereby marginalizing them. This marginaliza-

⁶ See, for example, Frank Stenton’s “The Historical Bearing of Place-Name Studies: The Place of Women in Anglo-Saxon society,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 25 (1943) 1-13. To study the place of *men* in Anglo-Saxon society would have seemed rather outlandish at this time.

⁷ Betty Bandel, “The English Chroniclers’ Attitude Toward Women,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* XVI (1955) 113-118. Although she expresses proto-feminist sentiments, Bandel still views women as peripheral to Anglo-Saxon, as well as her own, society.

⁸ Stenton 1.

⁹ See, for example, G. F. Browne, *The Importance of Women in Anglo-Saxon Times; The Cultus of St. Peter and St. Paul; and Other Addresses* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1919).

¹⁰ Rudolph Bambas, for instance, claims that for people living in a “primitive” society like the Anglo-Saxon “the only matters worth celebrating in verse are the affairs of heroic war chiefs and the brisk young men who follow them for gold and glory” 303.

¹¹ For a discussion of homosocial studies of Old English literature, see Joseph Harris, “Love and Death in the *Männerbund*: An Essay with Special Reference to the *Bjarkamál* and *The Battle of Maldon*,” *Heroic Poetry in the Anglo-Saxon Period: Studies in Honor of Jess B. Bessinger* ed. Helen Damico and John Leyerle (Kalamazoo: Medieval Inst. Pubs., 1993) 77-114.

¹² Rosemary Woolf, however, has argued that this poem draws on Roman themes that were never the ideals of Anglo-Saxon society. “The Ideal of Men Dying with their Lord in the *Germania* and in *The Battle of Maldon*,” *Anglo-Saxon England* 5 (1976) 63-81.

tion has sometimes taken the form of placing the women on a pedestal, with the assumption that the Anglo-Saxons were as much gentlemen as their later descendants aspired to be.¹³ John Thrupp's summation of the women's situation, which I quoted earlier, shows, however, that many scholars have taken it for granted that women were regarded as chattels, always under the rule of a man, first the father, then the husband, and that they were consistently subjected to physical and mental abuse. The women have been regarded as having no influence outside the home, and little inside it either. The only roles Anglo-Saxon society is supposed to allow a woman to play, apart from wife and mother, are those of the queen and the abbess. This marginalizing view of Anglo-Saxon women has then been carried over from historical studies into studies of Old English literature. The literature is therefore supposed to reflect the attitudes attributed to the Anglo-Saxons.

It is as a reaction to this masculinist scholarly tradition that feminist Old English research has developed. Although this tradition forms the starting point for most feminist studies, the research has diversified in a number of different directions, subsuming different theories and accommodating different approaches, so that as with feminist research within other fields, one cannot say that there exists one form of feminist Old English research, but rather a range of feminisms. As Toril Moi has stated, feminist criticism is not a methodological tool but a kind of political discourse informing the scholar's criticism.¹⁴ We see this political discourse informing feminist Old English research as well. Toril Moi has used a model by Julia Kristeva to structure feminist research, and this model can be a fruitful tool when attempting to structure feminist Old English research as well. Moi divides feminist research into three tiers as follows:

- (1) Women demand equal access to the symbolic order. Liberal feminism. Equality.
- (2) Women reject the male symbolic order in the name of difference. Radical feminism. Femininity extolled.
- (3) Women reject the dichotomy between masculine and feminine as metaphysical.¹⁵

Moi's use of the words "tier" and "stage" in her summary of Kristeva's description of the development of feminist research may seem to imply not only development but also progress from simplistic assumptions to greater enlightenment, but Moi is careful to point out, following Kristeva, that the three stages function simultaneously. To privilege stage three over the other two is to "lose touch with the political reality of feminism." Moi argues that the political situation at present is such that stages one and two are also important, but she raises a *caveat*: "an 'undeconstructed' form of 'stage

¹³ See, for example, Sharon Turner *The History of the Anglo-Saxons*.

¹⁴ Toril Moi, "Feminist Literary Criticism," *Modern Literary Theory: a Comparative Introduction* ed. Ann Jefferson and David Robey (London: Batsford, 1986) 204-21.

¹⁵ Moi 214.

2' feminism, unaware of the metaphysical nature of gender identities, runs the risk of becoming an inverted form of sexism."¹⁶

Feminist Old English research is situated along a continuum between stages two and three. For some feminist scholars feminism is a way of reading and re-evaluating Old English texts along the lines of Judith Fetterley's resisting reader. Their aim is to change and expand the canon, by including texts that have previously been deemed of little scholarly interest and by bringing female characters in the canonical texts into the foreground and re-evaluating their roles in order to give them a greater importance. These scholars could be said to belong to stage two. Other feminist scholars, influenced by post-structuralism and the French feminist school, use feminist theories as a basis for their work, allowing them to inform their studies; studies which employ approaches like gender theory, postmodernism or psychoanalysis. This would be stage three feminism.

Authorship and representation

Before we move on to investigate the different ways that feminists have approached *Wife* and *Wulf* I will make a few brief remarks about the issues of authorship and representation. Within literary criticism, the death of the author has been proclaimed, but within the field of feminist Old English studies many critics start their study of the poems by discussing the question of authorship. Almost all Old English poetry is anonymous, but scholars have assumed that the poems were composed orally by male poets, *scopas*, and later also written down by men, monks. It has also been suggested that the monks themselves composed poetry. In more recent years, however, scholars have pointed out that Anglo-Saxon nuns were also literate and had access to scriptoria.¹⁷ Furthermore, we have surviving texts showing that Anglo-Saxon nuns composed and wrote letters and poetry in Latin.¹⁸ There are no surviving vernacular texts known to have been composed and written by Anglo-Saxon women, but in the light of the evidence above it seems unlikely that they wrote no vernacular poetry at all.

The question of female authorship has also been discussed by feminist scholars in conjunction with *Wife* and *Wulf*. Arguments have been put forward that since the poems are spoken in a female voice, and since they are more emotional in content than other Old English poetry, they were most likely composed by women. Marilyn Desmond has even gone so far as to claim that all anonymous poetry speaking in a voice that is gendered female should be assumed to be the product of female poets.¹⁹

¹⁶ Moi 214.

¹⁷ Bernhard Bischoff, *Latin Palaeography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) 199-200.

¹⁸ There are letters written in Latin by the Anglo-Saxon nuns involved with Boniface's mission. D. Patricia Wallace, "Feminine Rhetoric and the Epistolary Tradition: The Boniface Correspondence," *Women's Studies* 24 (1995) 229-246, 230. Charlemagne forbade Anglo-Saxon nuns to compose and send *winileodas* 'songs for a lover.' Anne Klinck, "Lyric Voice and the Feminine in Some Ancient and Mediaeval *Frauenlieder*," *Florilegium* 13 (1994) 13-36, 20.

¹⁹ Marilyn Desmond, "The Voice of Exile: Feminist Literary History and the Anonymous Anglo-Saxon Elegy," *Critical Inquiry* 16.3 (1990) 572-90.

The claim is then that the poems represent “the woman’s point of view.” This argument seems, however, to be based on the assumption that poems about war, honour etc. are “male,” and that poetry about emotions is “female.” We need to discuss what makes a text “male” and another “female.” Is it the sex of the poet or is it something else? This issue is made all the more important since the consensus regarding the poet behind *Wife* and *Wulf* seems to be that he was a man adopting a female persona, which brings up questions of the gendered voice and representation. Is it a woman’s voice we hear if the poem was written by a man? It has been suggested that because of the paucity of examples, in conjunction with the patriarchal structure of Anglo-Saxon society, the poems cannot be regarded as representations of the female voice.²⁰

Performance complicates the issue of representation further. Old English poetry was, as far as we know, recited to an audience, and this was supposedly done by men only.²¹ If a male *scop* recites a poem that speaks in a woman’s voice, what effect does that have on the text and the audience?²² These are complicated issues, and we will see how different scholars approach them in different ways.

Essentialist feminist approaches to Old English literature

As stated above, feminist research that developed as a response to the masculinist view of Old English literature has taken different routes. One of those routes can be characterised as essentialist in its approach. This is a contentious term, sometimes used as a term of abuse between feminist scholars,²³ but in this discussion it is not intended as a value judgement on the scholars in question. I use the term simply to suggest that some feminist Old English studies have been based on a belief that there are certain biological characteristics, an essence, associated with, and guiding the actions of, each sex, which are made manifest in the literature of Anglo-Saxon society. My use of the term *essentialist* differs, however, from usage in other fields of feminist research, as regards what qualities are assumed to make up the essence of woman. In other fields, essentialist feminists ascribe to women a nurturing, passive essence that makes women fit only for homemaking and not for active, public life. In feminist Old English research, essentialist scholars construct women as inherently strong and autonomous, playing central roles in public life.

Returning to Moi’s tiers of feminist research, we see that it is stage two which, in some instances, can become essentialist “by uncritically taking over the very meta-physical categories set up by patriarchy in order to keep women in their places.”²⁴

²⁰ Clare A. Lees, “At a Crossroads: Old English and Feminist Criticism,” *Reading Old English Texts* ed. Katherine O’Brien O’Keeffe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 146-69, 157.

²¹ The idea that *Wife* and *Wulf* might have been recited in all-female groups by women has, to my knowledge, not been suggested.

²² Anne Klinck suggests that it would “add a dimension of irony.” “Lyric Voice” 14.

²³ For a discussion of the problematics of this term in feminist research, see Jane Roland Martin, “Methodological Essentialism, False Difference, and Other Dangerous Traps,” *Signs* 19.3 (1994) 630-57.

²⁴ Moi 214.

Feminist research of this kind is carried out within the framework of masculinist research, using the same categories that masculinist research has created and attributed to Anglo-Saxon society, but valorising the categories assigned to women. As in masculinist research within, for example, historical studies, Anglo-Saxon men are given the roles of the active warrior and the political leader, the distributor of wealth, the ring-giver; women are given roles of wife, mother and peaceweaver.²⁵ The number of roles have later been expanded by the inclusion of the hostess, the ritual mourner, the goader and the counsellor.²⁶ However, the masculinist definitions of what is male and what is female in Old English literature and Anglo-Saxon society remain. Rather than questioning the definitions and distributions of gender roles, the work undertaken by these essentialist critics has been to re-evaluate female roles and give them greater importance. Claims like Tacitus' pronouncement that the Germanic tribes took advice from women in matters of divination and religion, and Frank Stenton's statement that Anglo-Saxon women were allowed a say in public affairs²⁷ have been used as evidence of women's importance outside the home. The emphasis is on the relative strength and freedom of action attributed to the female characters. This emphasis often causes the scholar to argue that the female characters cannot be labelled weak or passive. An example of this argument is the valorisation of the role of peaceweaver, which can otherwise be regarded as a powerless and ultimately futile role. The peaceweavers we encounter, for example, in *Beowulf* do not succeed in creating lasting peace. Yet the role of the peaceweaver has been reconstructed as a female warrior role. This warrior role, however, is based on essentialist assumptions. As Moi points out, although it might be nice "to be told that women really are strong, integrated, peace-loving, nurturing and creative beings, this plethora of new virtues is no less essentialist than the old ones."²⁸

The essentialist feminists resist the canon of Anglo-Saxon research from the inside, so to speak. The construction of the masculinist tradition itself is not questioned, only the value placed on the different characters. Female characters previously thought unimportant are brought out of obscurity and discussed in detail. It is maintained that they are of central importance to the texts.²⁹

In their re-evaluation of female characters in Old English literature and construction of a professional identity, essentialist feminists have often co-opted them for the purpose of making them into feminist heroes.³⁰ Some of the literary characters,

²⁵ For an argument that peaceweaver was not solely seen as a female role, see Larry Sklute "Freoðuwebbe in Old English Poetry," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 71 (1970) 534-41.

²⁶ For a discussion of these roles see Alexandra Hennessey Olsen, "Gender Roles," *A Beowulf Handbook* ed. Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1997) 311-24.

²⁷ Stenton 1.

²⁸ Moi 210.

²⁹ Wealhþeow is one character who has undergone this change, moving from ornamental drinks dispenser to shrewd political organiser. Thryth is another, reinvented from an example of a bad queen into an independent, strong woman resisting the male gaze. See, for example, Helen Damico "The Valkyrie Reflex in Old English Literature," *Allegorica* 5.2 (1980) 149-67; Jane Chance Nitzsche, *Woman as Hero in Old English Literature* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1986).

³⁰ They make a point of not referring to them as heroines, as their argument is that the female characters fulfil the central role ascribed to a male hero, rather than the supplementary role of a heroine.

like Elene, Judith, Juliana,³¹ lend themselves well to this kind of co-option, where the characters are made to represent female strength. Elene commands an army in her search for the True Cross and converts successfully, through the use of torture, a group of prominent Jews. Judith decapitates Holofernes and secures the victory of her people against the Assyrians. Juliana fights the Devil in prison, overcomes torture, dies a glorious death as a martyr and is taken to heaven. These characters are assumed to show, not only that the Anglo-Saxons valued strength, fortitude and independence in women, but also that those are qualities that all women possess; they are part of the female essence.

The co-option of the narrators of *Wife* and *Wulf* is more problematic than that of Elene, Judith and Juliana. The women of *Wife* and *Wulf* are confined spatially and suffering from grief because of the loss of a husband or a lover. The narrator of *Wulf* states that she is stationary, following her lover only in her mind whilst crying in the rain.³² She claims that her longing for Wulf has made her ill.³³ The narrator of *Wife* claims to have had a hard life, and it is now harder than ever.³⁴ She speaks repeatedly of her longing and like the narrator of *Wulf* she states that she must weep over her many miseries.³⁵ Both narrators seem unable to change their situation, which is perhaps the greatest obstacle in the project of turning them into heroes. The suffering and weeping make the narrators of these poems seem weak and passive, unlike the more obvious female heroes of Old English literature,³⁶ so if one is looking for a “woman of power and autonomy”³⁷ these poems become problematic. Some scholars, however, have produced readings, as we shall see, that allow the narrators to carry out more active roles.

Co-option of the narrator of *Wulf* is one of the key elements in Alexandra Hennessey Olsen’s reading of the poem.³⁸ Referring to Fetterley’s resisting reader, Olsen resists the idea of Anglo-Saxon society as heroic, and does so by looking at the poetry the society produced, using a historicist approach. Olsen rejects the view of Old English female characters as victims and rereads *Wulf* in an attempt to find a more active role for the narrator. Rearranging the punctuation and the division of lines of the poem allows her to “read the poem in a feminist manner” which makes the narrator “a woman of power and autonomy, concerned with the fate of her people, rather than a

³¹ All three characters are covered in Jane Chance Nitzsche’s *Woman as Hero*.

³² *Wulfes ic mines widlastum wenum dogode; þonne hit wæs renig weder ond ic reotugu sæt* (ll. 9-10).

³³ *wena me þine/ seoce gedydon* (ll. 13b-14a).

³⁴ *hwæt ic yrmþa gebad, siþþan ic up weox, niwes opþe ealdes, no ma þonne nu.* (ll. 3-4).

³⁵ *þær ic wepan mæg mine wræcsipas, earfopa fela;* (ll. 38-39a).

³⁶ Alain Renoir, for example, has referred to the Wife’s “almost total passivity” and pointed out how her frustration “blatantly fail[s] to elicit anything more active than the possibility of her sitting... and weeping.” The husband, on the other hand is “a man of action.” “Christian Inversion” 21.

³⁷ Alexandra Hennessey Olsen, “Old English Women, Old English Men: A Reconsideration of ‘Minor’ Characters,” *Old English Shorter Poems. Basic Readings* ed. Katherine O’Brien O’Keeffe (New York: Garland Publishing, 1994) 65-83, 73.

³⁸ Olsen “Old English Women, Old English Men.”

woman suffering loss.”³⁹ Olsen postulates that the narrator is a woman in a position of public power, married to the leader of the group, Wulf, and in the poem she commands him to return from his wanderings and carry out his duty of protecting the settlement. In her reading, Olsen exhibits the ideas espoused by essentialist feminists: the narrator is active, in a position of power and in charge of her own person; she is not paralysed by grief but acting in the interest of her people; her personal feelings for her husband and child come second to her public responsibilities.

In her interpretation Olsen also discusses the problem of public and private spheres, which has been a key issue in feminist research. Women’s exclusion in many societies from the public sphere has posed a problem for those feminist scholars who wish to show the power of women. Some feminist scholars have argued that the spheres are contiguous and interdependent, which avoids the problem of the exclusion of women and the concomitant loss of power.⁴⁰ It has been stated, for example, that an “understanding of the interdependence of the spheres reveals that women have wielded more power than has been apparent.”⁴¹ In her analysis of *Wulf*, Olsen emphasises the interconnectedness of the two spheres and stresses that the public and private worlds merge in the poem. This statement allows her to evade the argument that there is little extant evidence of women wielding public power in Anglo-Saxon society.

Another strategy of co-opting a narrator is to reinterpret her actions as those of a warrior. The narrator of *Wife* is often regarded as almost totally passive.⁴² Barrie Ruth Strauss has argued, however, using speech act theory, that the narrator is an active warrior avenging herself.⁴³ Strauss proposes to show that through her use of speech the narrator is also acting, that by speaking the narrator “does more than merely sit and weep.”⁴⁴ The narrator takes action by not suffering in silence; through speaking the narrator controls the interpretation of her life. Strauss points out how the narrator in the opening lines of the poem repeatedly asserts her right to speak and to structure the story of her life and how it is to be understood. The problematic ending of the poem Strauss reads as a curse, interpreting it as the narrator “ordering the world to correspond to her words.”⁴⁵ Strauss’ reading constructs the narrator as active and heroic whilst never leaving her confinement, and allows her to avenge herself, not on the people responsible for her misery, but through the effect she has on those listening to the poem. Strauss’ use of speech act theory is not what makes her reading an essentialist one, but her insistence that the “apparent passivity” of the narrator is actually a form of action and vengeance is closely related to the essentialist research I outlined earlier: where emphasis is placed on the strength and freedom of action of women, rejecting passivity to the extent that female characters in Old English poetry cannot possibly be weak.

³⁹ Olsen 73.

⁴⁰ For a discussion of public and private spheres, see, for example, Greene and Kahn 15-21.

⁴¹ Greene and Kahn 17.

⁴² See, for instance, Renoir’s “Christian inversion.”

⁴³ Barrie Ruth Strauss, “Women’s Words as Weapons: Speech as Action in ‘The Wife’s Lament,’” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 23.2 (1981) 268-85.

⁴⁴ Strauss 269.

⁴⁵ Strauss 276.

Olsen's and Strauss' interpretations both downplay any romantic notions in *Wife and Wulf*. In fact, Old English literary research in general has avoided romantic readings of poetry. Since there are no descriptions of love in *Beowulf*, the text most often turned to as a guide to Anglo-Saxon society, many scholars assume that the Anglo-Saxons did not see love and romance as literary themes.⁴⁶ Some scholars also claim that indifference towards love was not confined to literature, but extant in society in general.⁴⁷ To maintain that an entire society is devoid of feelings we would call love may seem somewhat radical. This claim is frequently made with reference to the alterity of the Middle Ages. It is evident that the Anglo-Saxons, living in a society so different from ours, had differing views on, for example, religion, and that individuality had a different meaning for them than for us..

Scholars who claim that the Anglo-Saxons were not interested in love as a literary theme, or love at all, often argue that this lack of interest was an expression of high morals, that the Anglo-Saxons were above such mundane, private, matters.⁴⁸ The implication is that love between man and woman, as opposed to love for one's lord or motherly love, for example, is not a "worthy" topic of poetry. To carry such an argument to its logical conclusion one might argue that scholars who argue for a love-less society see an interest in love as a weakness, an effeminacy that only afflicts England after the Conquest, exemplified in courtly romances.

Essentialist feminist scholars have adopted this theory of absence of love to a degree. They too see an interest in love as a weakness, but not of the entire society so much as of the women. Having already established the powerful position of the Anglo-Saxon woman, they argue that an asexual reading of Old English poetry allows for a more active character. It is as if a reading that includes physical love and tender emotions between characters would reduce the importance of the woman in question. Possibly the scholars cannot envisage a sexual relationship where the woman would not be at a disadvantage power-wise. In the case of *Wulf*, some feminist scholars have argued that the narrator is a sorrowing mother lamenting a lost child. Thus the passion and the weeping we meet in the poem are caused by strong maternal emotions and not by sexual longing.

One of the first scholars to argue for the narrator as mother in *Wulf* is Dolores Warwick Frese.⁴⁹ Like many scholars, she reiterates the argument that romantic pas-

⁴⁶ One of the most quoted statements to this effect was made by C. S. Lewis, who noted that love "in our sense of the word, is as absent from the literature of the Dark Ages as from that of classical antiquity." *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* (1936; New York: Oxford University Press, 1958) 9. Michael Swanton argued that love as a literary topic was "alien to the Germanic mind" 271. C. L. Wrenn claimed that as "a poetic theme love is practically alien to the Germanic, and therefore Anglo-Saxon genius." *A Study of Old English Literature* (New York: Norton, 1967) 21.

⁴⁷ C. L. Wrenn, "On the Continuity of English Poetry," *Anglia* 76 (1958) 41-59.

⁴⁸ See, for example, Hugh Magennis, "'No Sex Please, We're Anglo-Saxons': Attitudes to Sexuality in Old English Prose and Poetry," *Leeds Studies in English* 26 (1995) 1-27; Stephen Morrison, "The Figure of *Christus Sponsus* in Old English Prose," *Liebe-Ehe-Ehebruch in der Literatur des Mittelalters* ed. Xenja von Ertzdorf and Marianne Wynn (Giessen: Schmitz, 1984) 5-15.

⁴⁹ Dolores Warwick Frese, "Wulf and Eadwacer: The Adulterous Woman Reconsidered," *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature* ed. Helen Damico and Alexandra Hennessey Olsen

sion is not an Old English poetic topic and points instead to the concern *Wealhþeow* shows for the future of her young sons and Hildeburh's grief over her dead warrior-son as evidence of Old English poetry concerning itself with grieving mothers. Frese chooses to see *Wulf* as a lament spoken by a mother grieving for her son who has fallen in battle, urging an angelic messenger, Eadwacer, to carry the son to Heaven. Several scholars have followed Frese's interpretation that the poem is motivated by maternal grief, and they take as their starting point the fact that Old English literature arguably contains more mothers than lovers.⁵⁰

Reading the poem as a concern for the welfare of a child does make the point that we do not know to what extent romantic poetry was consumed and appreciated in Anglo-Saxon society. The scholars who read the poem as spoken by a mother treat maternal love, however, as an essence, assuming that maternal emotions and their expressions are universal, regardless of time and place.⁵¹ The notion of maternal love as an essential emotion has been questioned by some scholars.⁵² These scholars have argued that maternal feelings are socially constructed and that biological instincts may be overridden by other concerns. It is a contested issue and scholars such as Philippe Ariès have come under criticism.⁵³ The questioning of maternal emotions alerts us, however, to the fact that a mother's love for her child cannot be taken for granted as a universal in all societies, but must be problematised like any other aspect of human existence.

As we have seen in this section, essentialist feminist research places a great emphasis on the close contiguity of literary texts and the society that produced them. They are seen to be in a metaphoric relationship, where one can stand for the other: looking at one is looking at the other. The research is not historicist in the usual sense of the word, since the scholars are not interested so much in the social construction of the Anglo-Saxons as in the possible use of Anglo-Saxon society and its texts to re-evaluate and valorise Anglo-Saxon women. I argue that this is because the scholars appropriate Old English literary characters for identity construction to a greater extent than other feminist scholars. The co-option of the characters is not only carried out in order to redress an imbalance in Old English studies, but the characters are also constructed as feminist role-models. The essentialist scholars believe in a strong position for Anglo-Saxon women, and this allows them to re-shape the Old English female

(Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990) 273-91. The article was first published in *Notre Dame English Journal* 15.1 (1983) 1-22.

⁵⁰ See for example, Marijane Osborn, "The Text and Context of *Wulf and Eadwacer*," *The Old English Elegies: New Essays in Criticism and Research* ed. Martin Green (London: Associated University Presses, 1983) 174-89; Carol Parrish Jamison, "*Wulf and Eadwacer*: A Mother's Lament for Her Son," *Publications of the Mississippi Philological Associations* (1987) 88-95; Suzuki.

⁵¹ For an example of an essentialist reading of Anglo-Saxon motherhood see Mary Dockray-Miller, "Mixed Pairs: Gender Construction in Anglo-Saxon Art and Poetry" diss., Loyola University, 1996.

⁵² See, for instance, Philippe Ariès on medieval children in *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 1962) Chapter II; Elisabeth Badinter on motherhood in eighteenth century France in "Maternal Indifference," *French Feminist Thought* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987) 150-87. For studies of medieval parenthood and infanticide, see Carol Clover, "The Politics of Scarcity: Notes on the Sex Ratio in Early Scandinavia," *New Readings* 100-134; Tasioulas.

⁵³ See, for example, Shulamith Shahar, *Childhood in the Middle Ages* (London: Routledge, 1990).

characters into active heroes, suitable for the project of creating an ancestry of strong women to look up to. This project is partly the reason why these scholars also tend to favour literal readings over allegorical ones. They reject, for example, the suggestion that Elene personifies the Church, sometimes using the argument that such a reading reduces the impact of the female characters.⁵⁴ Allegorical readings are regarded by these scholars as stripping away or obscuring the female qualities of the character.⁵⁵ The vehemence with which scholars such as Olsen and Damico express their rejection may be explained when we investigate what is at stake. Elene and Judith are constructed by the essentialist scholars as spiritual foremothers, and to argue that they are not strong feminist role-models but allegorical figures scuppers this project. It is interesting to note, however, that the rejections of allegorical readings are directed towards the interpretations of *Elene* and *Judith*. Allegorical readings of *Wife* have been made by some scholars,⁵⁶ but to the best of my knowledge, no feminist scholars have responded.

Theoretically-informed feminist research

Research based on essentialist assumptions is not the only route feminist research has taken. In many fields of research the word feminism has been replaced by feminisms, since the applications of feminist theories are very diverse. One definition of feminisms is that the term represents “a multiplicity of points of view which nevertheless do possess at least some common denominators when it comes to the notion of the *politics* of representation.”⁵⁷ The feminism that I will be investigating in this section is feminist research influenced by French feminist theory, mainly that of Julia Kristeva. I will look at critics who theorise textuality in relation to women in their studies of *Wife* and *Wulf*, particularly when it concerns the issue of representation.

Some of the research into *Wife* and *Wulf* informed by feminist and gender theories has concerned itself with the textuality of the poems, of gendered voices and issues of representation. Comparisons have been made with, for example, the gendered voices of two other poems narrated in monologue, *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*. Some scholars have explored the Old English female voice as part of a continental and possibly universal genre, that of women’s songs, or *Frauenlieder*, which will be discussed in a separate section.

⁵⁴ Alexandra Olsen states in her work on Elene and Juliana that scholars who treat them as allegorical “refuse to see the female characters as human beings.” “Cynewulf’s Autonomous Women: A Reconsideration of Elene and Juliana,” *New Readings* 222-32, 224.

⁵⁵ “The result of [allegorical] interpretations is to diminish the reader’s engagement with what is essentially feminine in the flesh-and-blood heroine.” Helen Damico and Alexandra Hennessey Olsen “Introduction,” *New Readings* 1-25, 13.

⁵⁶ See, for example, Swanton, and W. F. Bolton “*The Wife’s Lament* and *The Husband’s Message*: A Reconsideration Revisited,” *Archiv für das Studium der Neueren Sprachen und Literaturen* 205 (1969) 337-51.

⁵⁷ Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1989) 141.

Gendered voices and textual femininity

Not all scholars who discuss gendered voices do so from the viewpoint of authorship and representation. Helen T. Bennett has addressed the issue of gendered voices in a comparison of voices of exile in, on the one hand, *Wife and Wulf*, and on the other, *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*. She employs Julia Kristeva's theories of the abject and the other and Jakobson's metaphor and metonymy to describe the language of the poems. Bennett argues that even in exile the Anglo-Saxon men are part of society: "the coded role of the male does not actually end with his exile,"⁵⁸ whereas the women can be said to live in exile even when they remain in the society. Bennett argues that the reason for this difference in the exile of men and women in Anglo-Saxon society is to be sought in the class system, where, referring to Kristeva, Bennett claims that "gender has always been class,"⁵⁹ and the female gender would be a lower class than the male. According to Bennett the narrators of *Wulf* and *Wife* exemplify the abject in a way that the male narrators do not, since the women in Anglo-Saxon society occupy the place of the other. Bennett argues that as in other Judaeo-Christian societies, Anglo-Saxon women are given the place of the other, the "polymorphic, orgasmic body"⁶⁰ that allows the men to construct a Law for themselves. Kristeva has argued that women are excluded from society not only on earth, but also in heaven. Bennett finds a parallel to this exclusion in the poems she examines, in that the male exiles of *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer* can find consolation in God, whereas the narrators of *Wife* and *Wulf* find no such solace, or as Bennett phrases it, "the abstract, symbolic, patriarchal Word would not comfort their 'polymorphic, orgasmic body.'"

The four poems Bennett discusses all revolve around a narrator in one form of exile or another. The difference between the two sets of poems lies partly in the type of exile the narrator is subjected to. The speakers of *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer* are travelling outside society, moving over water. The speakers of *Wife* and *Wulf* are stationary, tied to the ground, so to speak. Another difference is the language they use to express their emotions. Bennett shows that the suffering of the male speakers of *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer* stems from the contrast between past joys and present despair. The female speakers of *Wife* and *Wulf* do not show such a difference between the past and the present. Bennett argues that the narrators instead "portray a history of ambivalent relations with their societies and their mates, expressed in personal, emotional terms, transcending social ritual." Bennett points to the difference in endings between the two sets of poems. In *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer* there is a "smooth transition from the patriarchal Germanic warrior society to the Christian society, as exile becomes the metaphor for the general human condition of seeking God." No such transition takes place for the narrators of *Wife* and *Wulf*: "no end to exile or insecurity is sought from above."

⁵⁸ Bennett, "Exile and the Semiosis of Gender in Old English Elegies," 45.

⁵⁹ Bennett 48.

⁶⁰ Kristeva quoted in Bennett 47.

Following Kristeva, Bennett states that women's language is informed by a "corporeal, immediate, fluid experience."⁶¹ This fluid language Bennett regards as expressing the metonymic mode, whereas the language of the male exiles is phrased in the metaphoric mode. When the Wanderer and the Seafarer speak

[h]ardships are *substituted* for the pleasures of the past. Yet the final metaphoric substitution is unity with God, who reconciles all differences, and who provides a divine equivalent to the earthly class system.⁶²

The female exiles, however, long "for contiguity here and now in a world of separations." Both *Wife* and *Wulf* end without resolution, and separation has erased past unions.

Touching briefly on the question of authorship, Bennett discusses the seeming impossibility of resolving the poems into meaning. Referring to Charles Peirce's semiotic theories, she argues that "interpretants [meanings] ... swim along in a semiotic continuum,"⁶³ which would allow many different interpretations to exist at the same time. Here Bennett demonstrates her own alliance with the metonymic mode through a deferral of meaning and resolution.

The gendered language of *Wife* is also the subject of Shari Horner's study of the poem.⁶⁴ She employs Judith Butler's theories of gender as performance to explain the "heroic" nature of what she refers to as "the 'female' elegies." Horner is not interested in whether the poet is male or female; instead she investigates how "the gender identity of the speaker is discursively produced."

Horner interprets the poem as referring to early female monasticism in Anglo-Saxon England, and its use of what she calls a "discourse of enclosure." She quotes Judith Butler, stating that gender identity "is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results." Horner states that the "gender conventions" that establish the gender of the narrator of *Wife* are what she calls

the discursive formulation of the historically specific, essentialist views developed about the female body and femininity in the early centuries of Christianity.⁶⁵

The discourse, developed in the early church with reference to monasticism, Horner states, was specifically designed to contain and enclose the female body. Like Bennett, Horner juxtaposes *Wife* and *Wulf* with *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*. She sees in the two former poems a physical restriction of the female body which is lacking

⁶¹ Bennett 45-50.

⁶² Bennett 51. Original emphasis.

⁶³ Bennett 53.

⁶⁴ Shari Horner "En/Closed Subject: *The Wife's Lament* and the Culture of Early Medieval Female Monasticism," *Æstel* 2 (1994) 45-61.

⁶⁵ Horner 46-50.

from the two latter ones. This restriction, Horner argues, reflects cultural attitudes towards the female body, and genders the narrators of both poems as female.

Horner sees a similar language of gendered seclusion and restriction of female bodies reflected in surviving letters by Anglo-Saxon missionary nuns working on the continent. She quotes a letter from the nun Egburg to Boniface, where she laments what Horner refers to as the “double bond of female claustration:” not only is the body sequestered from the world, but Egburg is also imprisoned in her female body.⁶⁶ Horner thus reads *Wife* as “a repeated set of acts which signify a female monastic subject,” where the gendered language of physical restriction signifies a female speaker, very much removed from the roaming exiles of *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*.⁶⁷

Anne Klinck has approached the idea of the gendered voice from a slightly different angle. When we look at poems expressed in a woman’s voice but authored by a man we should not, she maintains, “simply assume a male creation of female otherness.”⁶⁸ Instead Klinck argues for what she calls a *textual femininity* that is independent of the author. This, she maintains, is a way of avoiding “the biographical fallacy” as well as the assumption, expressed by, for example, Luce Irigaray, that “in a system dominated by men there can be no such thing as a woman’s voice.”⁶⁹ Klinck has set up four criteria for textual femininity:

1. the femininity lies in voice rather than authorship;
2. the utterance is perceived as in some way contrastive to male-voice song;
3. the language and style are simple, or affect simplicity;
4. the subject is the loves, loyalties and longings of the speaker.⁷⁰

With the aid of these criteria she has investigated ancient Greek texts, *Wife* and *Wulf*, the eleventh-century *Cambridge Songs* as well as Provençal texts and has claimed that they exhibit this textual femininity, regardless of the sex of the author. In her research she assigns the Old English poems to the genre of *Frauenlieder*, which is the topic of the next section.

Frauenlieder

Current work on *Wife* and *Wulf* as *Frauenlieder* is very much influenced by questions of representation and the gendered voice. What constitutes a *Frauenlied* or a “woman’s song” is a poem expressed in the voice of a woman, though most often written by a man. The subject matter is generally that of the woman’s sexual longing

⁶⁶ Horner 54.

⁶⁷ Horner 58.

⁶⁸ Klinck, “Lyric Voice.” Rudolph Bambas has argued that it would make the poetry incomprehensible to the audience 14.

⁶⁹ Klinck 15.

⁷⁰ Klinck 14.

for an absent lover, her jealousy and fear of losing him, or her grief over a love already lost. Some poems, however, celebrate an ongoing passionate relationship. However, in the early stages of research on *Frauenlieder* as a genre the woman expressing her sexual feelings was not a topic of discussion. Nineteenth century scholars were more interested in the alleged popular origin of this kind of poetry, regarding it as written by “the people” rather than by trained, literate poets.⁷¹

As stated earlier, Theodor Frings was one of the first scholars of the twentieth century to reintroduce the concept of *Frauenlieder*. His studies concerned themselves with continental troubadours,⁷² and they have later been taken up and developed by Anglo-Saxonists. Frings and other scholars, for example Leo Spitzer,⁷³ maintain that *Frauenlieder* is a universal genre of poems with a great temporal and geographic span. To this international genre, Frings and Spitzer refer examples from such disparate sources as ancient Egypt and China, and high medieval Provence and Andalusia.⁷⁴

To include *Wife* and *Wulf* in this genre, however, has not been uncontroversial. Since the poems are so complicated, and have generated so many different interpretations, some critics dismiss the notion that they belong to an international genre; we cannot even be certain that they are spoken by a woman, which some scholars see as a prerequisite for a poem being designated a “women’s song.”⁷⁵ Others have argued that they are wrongly placed in time and geography; they are too early to be part of a romantic genre, or that Anglo-Saxon society was too isolated from other literary societies that produced such poetry and there is therefore no question of influence. Clare A. Lees has put forward yet another argument as to why the poems cannot be *Frauenlieder*. She maintains that Anglo-Saxon poetry, even when appearing highly individualised, always expresses a generalised worldview. Because the generalised individual in Anglo-Saxon society is male, “the female voice of, for example, *The Wife’s Lament* has to be accommodated within, or abjected from, the conventions of the male.”⁷⁶ It therefore follows, she argues, that the poems cannot be regarded as *Frauenlieder*.

Those Anglo-Saxonists that have read *Wife* and *Wulf* as women’s songs have done so with different critical agendas. Some have argued for a continuity from the Old English poems to Middle English texts to Early Modern texts.⁷⁷ Some have wanted to absolve the poems of the charge of being aberrations within Old English literature, being spoken by women, by locating them within a supposed genre entirely

⁷¹ For a summary of these theories, see John F. Plummer, “Introduction,” *Vox Feminae: Studies in Medieval Woman’s Songs* ed. John F. Plummer (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1981) 5-17.

⁷² Theodor Frings, *Minnesinger und Troubadours* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1949).

⁷³ Leo Spitzer, “The Mozarabic Lyric and Theodor Frings’s Theories.”

⁷⁴ Spitzer 2.

⁷⁵ For a summary of various objections to labelling *Wife* and *Wulf* *Frauenlieder*, see Plummer 14.

⁷⁶ Lees, “Crossroads,” 157.

⁷⁷ See, for example, Dronke.

devoted to women's voices. Others have wanted to see the poems as exponents of a particularly female language.⁷⁸

As mentioned earlier there appears to be a general unwillingness in some quarters to read any romantic notions into Old English literature. We see this unwillingness reiterated as an argument concerning *Frauenlieder* as well. It has been claimed that the writing of romantic poetry or songs did not come about until the development of courtly poetry in twelfth century Provence, and that *Wife* and *Wulf* are therefore unlikely candidates. John Plummer, on the other hand, suggests that women's songs predate this kind of poetry and may possibly be "the source of the courtly poetry." He goes so far as to postulate that women's songs may be

the only remnants of precourtly popular song, perhaps a popular tradition whose roots stretch back intact into the late classical period, or whose roots may in fact lie deeper, and wider, than that.⁷⁹

Concentrating on the notion of women and women's voices in the categorisation of *Wife* and *Wulf* as women's songs, we see that they appeal not only to feminists, but that we find both what Toril Moi has called "female" and "feminist" criticism.⁸⁰ Feminist criticism, according to Moi is "a critical and theoretical practice committed to the struggle against patriarchy and sexism,"⁸¹ whereas female criticism is concerned with the writing about women, without necessarily being informed by feminist theories.

Female criticism is employed by critics like Clifford Davidson and Lois Bragg. Their chief concern is to find alliances between the Old English poems and poetry of other times and places. Davidson compares *Wife* and *Wulf* to some eleventh century Latin texts that have been found in Cambridge.⁸² He briefly enters into a discussion of whether the Anglo-Saxons could have been interested in erotic poetry, and he also comments on the social status of Anglo-Saxon women, in order to be able to argue that such a genre as "women's songs" could exist in Anglo-Saxon England. This ties in with his main project, which is to show that *Wife* and *Wulf* exhibit all the characteristics of *Frauenlieder*.

A similar project is pursued by Bragg, who compares the poems with the Spanish lyrics discussed by Spitzer. Her intention is to show that *Wife* and *Wulf* are "best read and understood against the background of medieval women's lyrics in general."⁸³

Both Davidson and Bragg are interested in the poems as examples of women's songs, but they do not pursue issues of women's voices or representation. A scholar

⁷⁸ See, for instance, Patricia Belanoff "Women's Songs, Women's Language: *Wulf and Eadwacer* and *The Wife's Lament*," *New Readings* 193-203.

⁷⁹ Plummer 5.

⁸⁰ Moi, "Feminist Literary Criticism."

⁸¹ Moi 204.

⁸² Clifford Davidson, "Erotic 'Women's Songs' in Anglo-Saxon England," *Neophilologus* 59 (1975) 451-462.

⁸³ Lois Bragg, "'Wulf and Eadwacer,' 'The Wife's Lament,' and Women's Love Lyrics of the Middle Ages," *Germanisch-romanische Monatsschrift* n. s. 39 (1989) 257-68, 258.

who investigates women's voices extensively is Anne Klinck, whose concept of textual femininity I outlined above. She too argues for a connection between *Wife* and *Wulf* and *Frauenlieder*. She focuses on the textuality of the poems and on representation, and avoids discussions of influence by regarding the terms *chanson de femme* and *Frauenlied* as "designations for a distinct type of poem—more broadly defined than a genre."⁸⁴ Klinck argues for a reading of textual femininity as a way of freeing the text from the restraints of the sex of the author. She compares the Old English poems to Greek poetry by Alcman (seventh century BC) and Sappho (sixth century BC). By studying the use of language she shows that the difference between the male Alcman and the female Sappho lies in her more psychologically complex poetry, not in the biological sex of the poets. Klinck rejects the statement by another scholar, Marilyn Skinner, that Sappho's language is more "'open, fluid, and polysemous,' and therefore, 'conspicuously nonphallic'" than Alcman's.⁸⁵ Klinck also rejects the idea that certain elements represent "the female point of view" and therefore earn the poem the name of woman's song, since these same elements may be found in male-voice song. She argues instead that it is the combination of elements that "creates the mode of woman's song." She compares Sappho's poetry to that of Catullus and Horace and argues that maleness and femaleness can be seen in the poems, but in "sets of conventions, rather than individual features, or the biological sex of the authors."⁸⁶ Likewise, she shows that Provençal and German texts share these characteristics as well, regardless of the sex of the author.⁸⁷

The feminine voices of the Greek women's songs are, according to Klinck, echoed in *Wife* and *Wulf* as well as the eleventh and twelfth century Mozarabic *kharjas*, the eleventh century Latin *Frauenlieder* from *The Cambridge Songs* and the thirteenth century *Carmina Burana*. Klinck, like other scholars, points to the expression of emotional longing and sexual needs in both poems. In *Wife* she finds that the "touches by which the femininity of this discourse is marked are slight, but telling."⁸⁸ The formulaic and conventional language which is normally applied in male, heroic contexts is adapted with minute changes, such as in the use of words like *hlaforð*, *leodfruma*, *folgaf*. Rather than assuming that these words point to a male narrator, she argues that they add to the poignancy of the poem when spoken by a woman. What the *Frauenlieder* of ancient Greece and medieval Europe have in common, according to Klinck, is that "the feminine is constructed as simple, personal, and candid."⁸⁹ These characteristics are present in *Wife* and *Wulf*. In both poems the narrators state their longing in a straightforward way, and they also state their sexual longing. In *Wife*, the narrator imagines lovers together while she herself is alone, and in *Wulf* the narrator states that the embraces of Eadwacer, although pleasurable, are no substitute

⁸⁴ Klinck 13.

⁸⁵ Klinck 18.

⁸⁶ Klinck 19. She specifically singles out in Catullus' and Horace's poetry a socio-political element which Sappho does not include.

⁸⁷ Klinck 22-25.

⁸⁸ Klinck 21.

⁸⁹ Klinck 27.

for Wulf. What Klinck has done, to an even greater extent than others who work with *Frauenlieder*, is to take these two Old English poems and place them in an international genre with a wide span, both temporally and spatially. She has also tried to show that what makes them specifically women's songs is not that they may or may not have been composed by a woman, but that they share certain characteristics: the voice is feminine even though the author may not be; the language and style are simple, or affect simplicity; the subject "is the loves, loyalties and the longings of the speaker."⁹⁰

Klinck rejects the notion of a specific "women's language" that can only be written by women. Patricia Belanoff, on the other hand, embraces such a notion, employing Kristeva's discussions of a semiotic language. In her study of *Wife* and *Wulf* as *Frauenlieder*, Belanoff argues that they should be read both as Old English poems and *Frauenlieder*. She discusses the "differentness" of the language in these poems, and argues that this stems from the fact that they are women's songs, "a genre which inevitably entails a differentness of language."⁹¹ She bases her argument on the theories of Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva. Rather than looking for similarities with other Old English poetry, like Patricia Wallace, who has shown similarities between *Wife* and other poems of exile,⁹² Belanoff seeks and emphasises the differences.

Belanoff uses Kristeva's theories of symbolic and semiotic language as a way of reading Old English poetry. Belanoff refers to Kristeva's ideas of a "pre-Oedipal unorganized flow of bodily pulsations and rhythms—the semiotic—which possesses languagelike qualities" as well as her theories of a symbolic language where "there is a one-to-one correspondence between signifier and signified."⁹³ Belanoff suggests that this symbolic language is exemplified by the formulaic requirements of Old English poetry: the four-line stress, the alliterative patterns etc. This symbolic language connects *Wife* and *Wulf* to the mainstream of Old English poetry. The symbolic language does not suppress the semiotic, however: "[i]t erupts into the symbolic flow of language." This eruption, or intermingling, is according to Belanoff, what ties the poems to the *Frauenlieder* as well as to Old English poetry. The semiotic language is, for example, revealed in the polysemous nature of the poems, according to Belanoff.

Belanoff argues that the emphasis in both poems on the 'I' of the narrator and her referring to everything as "mine" (my lord, my thoughts, my need, my exile), serves to emphasise how each of the narrators "feels her own self strongly as a bodily presence." Likewise the use of finite forms *beon* 'to be' and *wesan* 'to be, to happen' creates a feeling of immediacy. This immediacy takes away the need for background information, since the audience would see the performance as a person expressing emotions that take place in the present, not as relating events in the past. It is the emotional situation that is significant, and "[k]nowing the specifics of the events or the

⁹⁰ Klinck 14.

⁹¹ Belanoff 194.

⁹² D. Patricia Wallace, "Feminine Rhetoric and the Epistolary Tradition: The Boniface Correspondence," *Women's Studies* 24 (1995) 229-46.

⁹³ Belanoff 194. The following quotations are from pages 194-200.

identity of the people might well detract from our response.” Belanoff does not address the issue of the sex of the performer. She does, however, address the issue of authorship, claiming that regardless of the sex of the author the poems are descendants of “popular female-voiced songs, deeply rooted in the bodily rhythms of dance.”⁹⁴

Like Klinck, Belanoff comments on the alleged discordance between the speaker and the words. Belanoff argues that the fact that the narrator uses words that are by many scholars seen as pertaining to relationships between men only “lends a particularly effective resonance to them.”

The lack of straightforward chronology, especially in *Wife*, is also an effect of semiotic language, according to Belanoff, and serves to underscore the poem’s concern with emotions rather than intellectual or philosophical issues. Belanoff further points out how the disrupted rhythm in *Wife* can be seen to create gaps and silences which she argues, quoting Irigaray, recall the places of woman’s exclusion. Moreover, she claims that there exists a rhythm of subjective and objective passages, as well as a rhythm of emotional outbursts which echo the pulsations of the semiotic.⁹⁵ To see *Wife* and *Wulf* as exhibiting tensions between the symbolic and the semiotic is an interesting way of reading. Some scholars have regarded the texts as inferior poems that fall short of the usual standard of Old English poetry, but Belanoff’s readings give value to exactly those characteristics that have repelled scholars in the past, for example, the lack of details, the lack of internal chronology, the anomalous vocabulary and the unusual rhythm.

Most research into *Wife* and *Wulf* has been grounded in philology, and as such concerned with context and background. Scholars have debated the abode of the narrator of *Wife*, whether it is a cave or a grave; her sex, whether the speaker is male or female; whether there are one or two men involved in the poem, whether the lord and the *geong mon* are the same person. *Wulf* has mainly elicited discussion regarding linguistic obscurities: the meaning of the *hapax legomena* in the poem, *aþecgan*, *dogode*; the unusual use of refrain, *ungelic is us*; but also about background and context, that is, whether there are one or two men involved in the poem, whether *Wulf* and Eadwacer are the same person.

Feminist readings, on the other hand, have enabled critics to look at other facets of the poems. The difficulties inherent in our translation and understanding of obscure Old English words is acknowledged by feminist scholars, but these difficulties are not given the same prominence as in other research. Instead the critics focus on other aspects of the texts. Because the poems are seemingly spoken by women, scholars have been able to ponder questions of gender and representation: whether a male author has an impact on the female voice of the narrators, whether the voices of the poems can be said to represent a woman’s point of view or not.

Identity construction, metaphor and metonymy are as prevalent in feminist research as in any other kind of research. We see identity construction most clearly

⁹⁴ Belanoff 200.

⁹⁵ Belanoff 199.

manifested amongst those scholars that I have chosen to refer to as essentialist. They have found *Wife* and *Wulf* particularly suited for expressing ideas about Anglo-Saxon women as feminist role models, since the female narrators are more prominent in these poems than female characters in other Old English poems. The critics present a vision of Anglo-Saxon society as egalitarian and appreciative of women's strength. Their research is often carried out within a metaphoric framework, where Old English literary characters become interchangeable with Anglo-Saxon women, and where the Old English characters are assumed to possess and exhibit ideas and emotions that are the same as those of women today. Although the essentialist scholars can be said to represent the "women-in" approach that Allen Frantzen has referred to,⁹⁶ and which he finds unproductive, they have performed an important task, that of alerting us to the masculinist bias of previous Old English studies. It is only through their work that Old English scholarship has come to concern all of Anglo-Saxon society, instead of mistaking a privileged male elite for an entire people. Feminist essentialist research has also paved the way for research incorporating a more theoretically oriented research, where the scholars have managed to move away from the biographical fallacy. We see this theoretically based research typically exemplified by studies of the *Frauenlieder*. Rather than debating whether an Anglo-Saxon audience would appreciate a poem about a woman's emotions or whether the narrator of *Wife* is staying in a man-made cave or a system of natural caves, scholars now concentrate on other aspects of the poems, such as the use of gendered language. Now scholars look not only at what the poems mean, but also *how* they say it. This theoretically-informed feminist research uses a metonymic approach, where the need for resolution is changed and metaphoric preoccupation with categorising and organising texts into a hierarchical structure gives way to a concern with details and where several different meanings are allowed to co-exist and illuminate each other.

⁹⁶ Allen Frantzen, "When Women Aren't Enough," *Speculum* 68.2 (1993) 445-71. Frantzen argues that research based on studies of "women-in-history" or "women-in-society" without a theoretical base is of only limited value.

Conclusion

During the twentieth century Old English literature has acquired a reputation for being unintelligible, boring and irrelevant. The poetry has fared marginally better than the prose, even though *Beowulf* has long been regarded as a particularly dull poem.

Recently the image of *Beowulf* has begun to change, however, partly because of Seamus Heaney's lauded translation into modern English. The poem has also managed to cross over into popular culture with the filming of Michael Crichton's novel *Eaters of the Dead* under the title of *The Thirteenth Warrior*, starring Antonio Banderas in the leading role. The novel draws in part on *Beowulf* and so does the film. An even more direct reference to the poem is the film *Beowulf*, starring Christopher Lambert as the eponymous hero. Although the film has very little to do with the action of the poem, it has helped to bring it to the attention of a new generation of students, and has been used by many teachers in their classes in Old English literature. The film of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* also seems to have sparked an interest in Old English, since lecturers of Old English at a number of American universities have reported a substantial increase in enrolment.

In my thesis I have tried to show that Old English poetry is anything but unintelligible, boring and irrelevant. On the contrary, it contains many fascinating aspects, and is capable of eliciting a variety of responses from its readers. It is these responses that this thesis has tried to chart and analyse, particularly as regards the poems *Wife* and *Wulf*.

Anglo-Saxonists work within a framework constructed and maintained by tradition. They are socialised into this tradition and employ the tools and attitudes within it in their creation of a professional identity. This professional identity is made manifest in a number of ways, for instance, in conference papers or comments on the Ansaxnet, but the most prominent display of professional identities is through publication of research. Through published studies of Old English texts we can see the identity work of the scholar as well as how she or he negotiates tradition. It is evident that Anglo-Saxonists employ interpretations of the poems in their ongoing negotiation of professional identities. The identities are constructed along different lines of affinities, depending on the desire of the scholar in question, and the poems are interpreted in accordance with this desire. The scholars locate their identity work within either of two spheres of influence: Germanic or Roman. Many of the critics who opt for the Germanic sphere are concerned with issues of antiquity and precedence. Among them we find scholars such as Raymond Tripp and William Johnson, who argue that *Wife* is based on a Germanic tradition which is older and more genuine than a Roman, Latinate tradition. Religion also plays a part in these interpretations of antiquity and precedence. The poems are read as expressing the pagan beliefs of the early Anglo-Saxons. Scholars who construct their identity within a Roman sphere argue instead that the poems express the Christian beliefs of the later Anglo-Saxons. Scholars such

as Michael Swanton and Whitney Bolton claim that *Wife* is a Christian allegory, whereas Alain Renoir suggests, not an allegorical reading, but a poet subconsciously expressing Christian doctrine. James Spamer reads *Wulf* as a paraphrase on the Christian marriage ritual.

An alignment with a Christian or a pagan past is not the only way that identity construction makes itself known, however. Locating Old English poetry within a continuity of tradition is another way. C. L. Wrenn and Peter Dronke, amongst others, choose to see the poems as part of a continuous English tradition of literature that transcends the interruption of the Norman Conquest, and as Hugh Magennis argues, continues until the modern period.

A third way in which identities are negotiated is through a focus on the alterity of the Anglo-Saxons: the dissociation or rejection of aspects of Anglo-Saxon culture and society that are seen as Other. The Anglo-Saxons are constructed as barbaric and/or lacking in intellectual faculties. Scholars like John Thrupp and Elinor Lench interpret the Anglo-Saxons as brutal and crude, and reject them even as they devote their research to Anglo-Saxon society.

Scholars who study Old English poetry do so from different angles of approach: through metaphor or metonymy. These are two, often opposed ways of reading the poems. Metaphoric readings tend to focus on making the text settle down, placing it within a hierarchical framework, privileging product over process. Substitution of one text or one culture for another is a prominent feature of metaphoric readings. There must be a perfect match between texts, making them interchangeable. Some scholars who employ metaphoric readings, for example William Schofield and Robert Fitzgerald, look for a source for the poems, trying to find an older text into which they can fit the poem, which they see as a fragment, in order to fix its meaning. Fitting the poem into an older text enables the scholars to assign names to characters unnamed, and to explain seemingly inexplicable actions and situations. Another metaphoric approach is that used by, for example, Raymond Tripp and William Johnson, in which one culture is substituted for another; where Norse or Germanic culture become the same as Anglo-Saxon culture.

If metaphoric readings are trying to make sense of *Wife* and *Wulf* by tying them to sources or other cultures in an attempt to make the text settle down and fix the meaning, metonymic readings are doing the opposite, intending to open up the text for multiple readings, and avoiding imposing any hierarchical relationships on the poems, resisting conclusion or definitive interpretation. One way of doing this is explored by scholars such as Sarah Higley and Dorothy Anne Bray, where Early Welsh texts are juxtaposed with Old English texts, allowing the texts to interact without placing any demands for a definitive solution to the meanings of the poems. Instead the poems are allowed to cross-fertilise and illuminate each other.

As an example of how Old English poetry is used in the construction of a professional identity, as well as critics' metonymic or metaphoric approaches to the texts, I have investigated feminist studies of *Wife* and *Wulf*. I have proposed a categorisation as essentialist of a particular kind of feminist work where metaphoric readings

are used in the identity construction that is concerned with the narrators of the poems as women, rather than as literary characters. In the work of Alexandra Hennessey Olsen, for example, Old English poems are used to construct an identity of Anglo-Saxon women as role models or forerunners of modern women. Through a metaphoric reading of history and literature, women are viewed as standing in an analogical relationship with their modern counterparts. Prominent aspects of the role models created are emotional strength and societal power. Scholars like Barrie Ruth Strauss also emphasise that the narrators are active, in charge of their own destiny, rather than passive. Others stress that the narrators are not emotionally tied to any man, and critics like Dolores Warwick Frese argue that the emotional statements of *Wulf* are directed towards a child, rather than a lover.

Some feminist readings of *Wife* and *Wulf* are informed by French feminist theory. Scholars such as Helen Bennett and Patricia Belanoff employ the theories of Julia Kristeva in their studies of the language of the poems. They read the poems metonymically and refrain from trying to resolve the poems into fixed meanings. Instead they study the gendered language employed in the poems and the effects it may have on the reader.

One particular line of research within Old English studies concerns the concept of *Frauenlieder*, women's songs. By reading the Old English poems in a metonymic way, scholars are able to enrich the poems and open them up for new ways of reading by juxtaposing them with poems from other countries and periods that exhibit a similar emotional power. Anne Klinck and Patricia Belanoff have both studied the gendered language of *Wife* and *Wulf* and argue that their language locates them within the genre of women's songs.

In this thesis I have tried to show the great span of different interpretations engendered by the poems *Wife* and *Wulf* and the many uses the poems have been put to. I also hope to have conveyed a realisation that a multitude of readings is not a flaw, not something to be combated, but a sign of the richness and relevance to contemporary readers of the Old English poems.

Coda

This section is not intended to be anything but a place to collect the stray thoughts that have occurred to me while working on this thesis.

One such thought concerns the appropriateness of the titles given to the poems I have been looking at. The title *The Wife's Lament* has been discussed from the point of view of the sex of the narrator as well as the marital status of the narrator.¹ As regards *Wulf and Eadwacer*, scholars have been arguing whether Eadwacer is a proper name or whether it should be deleted from the title. No scholar, however, seems to have raised the issue that the title leaves out the speaker altogether. Although the consensus is that the poem is spoken by a woman, the title refers to the two men named in the poem. Perhaps this reflects a lingering bias in the interpretation of the poems that should be addressed by critics. In 1898 Stopford Brooke described the poem as “a little story of love and jealousy between two men, Wulf and Eadwacer.”² J. A. Ward argued in 1960 in his study of *Wife* that the poem relates the story of a “coup” in a clan, directed towards the narrator’s husband. Ward suggests that the narrator mistakenly thinks that she is the target of the hostilities.³ In 1977, Alain Renoir argued that the poem is really about the misfortunes of the husband and that the Wife is only a foil for his experiences.⁴ It seems unlikely nowadays that any critic would argue that the narrators of *Wife* and *Wulf* are unimportant in their own poems, and yet the title *Wulf and Eadwacer* remains unquestioned.

Whither research in Old English poetry?

How can the study of Old English poetry develop from here? What new ways of reading can we employ in order to allow the poems to grow? There are, of course, as many ideas and ways of reading as there are scholars, although certain ideas are more popular than others. Personally, I think that the use of anamorphosis can open up new ways of reading and appreciating Old English poems. It is a tool that allows the critic to move beyond the search for answers to cruxes. Instead the critic can enjoy the multiple resonances, allusions and meanings of the poems.

Allowing for metonymic interpretations of Old English poems could perhaps also lead to a loosening of the stern attitude often expressed by scholars towards Old English studies. The field would perhaps benefit from not taking itself so seriously. It can seem at times that the scholars are guarding their expertise and scholarship too closely, excluding those, undergraduates for example, who may need a light-hearted introduction to the subject. Tom Weller, for instance, in *Culture Made Stupid* has

¹ As has been mentioned in chapter 2, it has been pointed out that the Wife of the title is a translation of the German *Frau*, which need not refer to a married woman.

² Stopford Brooke, quoted in Lawrence 249.

³ J. A. Ward, “*The Wife's Lament: An Interpretation*,” *Journal of English and German Philology* 59 (1960) 26-33.

⁴ Renoir “Christian Inversion.”

parodied *Beowulf* in what I consider a rather clever and amusing way.⁵ When this parody was alluded to on the Ansaxnet, one scholar remarked that it was not any good since it had Beowulf killing Grendel with a sword, whereas in the poem Grendel is killed by hand. The “low-brow” films based on *Beowulf* that I referred to previously were, likewise, not embraced by all scholars as amusing reworkings of the material, or good attention-grabbing introductions to the poem for undergraduates. Some scholars denounced the films as not being scholarly enough and distorting people’s perception of the poem. Similar complaints were raised against Seamus Heaney’s translation of the poem.⁶ It is my opinion that humorous or “low-brow” reworkings of the text should not be regarded as a cause for concern. If *Beowulf* is the literary treasure we argue that it is, it should be able to withstand reinterpretations and variant readings. To argue, as some scholars did (*vide* AnsaxDat) that Heaney damaged the poem and Old English scholarship can only be destructive for the field.⁷

As should have been evident throughout this thesis, for many Anglo-Saxonists there exists a chasm between those critics who focus on linguistic studies of Old English literature and those who approach the texts from the point of view of literary criticism, what is sometimes referred to, by its opponents, as “theory” rather than theory. Linguists accuse the theorists of not being able to perform “real research,” and the theorists accuse the linguists of being narrow-minded and reactionary. It is my opinion that the animosity between these two camps, which is sometimes made visible in the Ansaxnet discussions, can only be destructive for Old English studies, and it can only be hoped that this perceived gulf will be closed rather than widened in the years to come.

Further research

In this thesis I have only begun to scratch the surface of the mechanisms and processes that influence the research within Old English studies. There are many different routes that one can choose in order to explore them further. Here I will suggest a few.

Synchronic and diachronic studies of the leading journals within the field may yield interesting insights into how it is decided what constitutes a suitable topic for research and how an academic discourse is created, maintained and changed.

A survey of hiring practices within departments of English could be a way of studying how Anglo-Saxonists are regarded by their own, as well as scholars outside their chosen remit. On what grounds are they hired: for their linguistic or literary competence? What courses are they given to teach?

A study of the construction of curricula for students may produce illuminating results as regards the opinions of and attitudes to Old English research. Of particular interest, I think, would be a comparative study between universities of different coun-

⁵ Tom Weller, *Culture Made Stupid: A Misguided Tour of Illiterature, Fine and Dandy Arts, and the Subhumanities* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

⁶ Seamus Heaney, *Beowulf* (London: Faber, 1999).

⁷ After the publication, some scholars complained that Heaney’s introduction of Celticisms into the text was somehow falsifying the poem, rather than opening it up to a wider audience.

tries and continents, especially as there seems to be a change under way in the USA, where it is reported that more undergraduates are taking courses in Old English.

Finally, I would like to see more in-depth studies of the discussions on the Ansaxnet. I am sure that they are a gold-mine for anyone who wishes to know more about Anglo-Saxonists and their research.

Appendix I

Wulf and Eadwacer

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 hwæpre eac lað.

Wulf, min Wulf, wena me þine

seoce gedýdon, þine seldcymas,

murnende mod, nales meteliste.

Gehyrest þu, Eadwacer? Uncerne earne hwelp

bireð wulf to wuda.

Þæt mon eaþe tosliteð þætte næfre gesomnad wæs,

uncer giedd geador.

To my people it is as though one might present them with a sacrifice: they want to destroy him if he comes under subjugation.

A difference exists between us.

Wulf is on one island; I am on another. That island is secure, surrounded by fen. There are deadly cruel men on the island; they want to destroy him if he comes under subjugation.

A difference exists between us.

In hopes I have endured the remoteness of the footsteps of my Wulf, when it was rainy weather and I sat weeping, and when the intrepid warrior pinioned me in his arms – there was pleasure for me in that, but it was loathsome to me too.

Wulf, my Wulf! my hopes in you have made me sick, the rareness of your visits, my grieving mind; not want of food.

Are you listening, Eadwacer? Our wretched whelp Wulf will carry off to the wood. One easily divorces what was never united – the riddle of us two together.

(translated by S. A. J. Bradley¹)

¹ S. A. J. Bradley trans and ed, *Anglo-Saxon Poetry* (London: Dent, 1982) 366-67.

The Wife's Lament

Ic þis giedd wrece bi me ful geomorre,
 minre sylfre sið. Ic þæt secgan mæg,
 hwæt ic yrmþa gebad, siþþan ic up weox,
 niwes oþþe ealdes, no ma þonne nu.
 A ic wite wonn minra wræcsipa.

Ærest min hlaford gewat heonan of leodum
 ofer yþa gelac; hæfde ic uhtceare
 hwær min leodfruma londes wære.
 Ða ic me feran gewat folgað secan,
 wineleas wræcca, for minre weaþearfe.
 Ongunnon þæt þæs monnes magas hycgan
 þurh dyrne geþoht, þæt hy todælden unc,
 þæt wit gewidost in woruldrice
 lifdon laðlicost, ond mec longade.
 Het mec hlaford min herheard niman,
 ahte ic leofra lyt on þissum londstede,
 holdra freonda. Forþon is min hyge geomor,
 ða ic me ful gemæcne monnan funde,
 heardsæligne, hygegeomorne,
 mod miþendne, morþor hycgendne.
 Bliþe gebæro ful oft wit beotedan
 þæt unc ne gedælde nemne deað ana
 owiht elles; eft is þæt onhworfen,
 is nu * * * swa hit no wære
 freondscipe uncer. Sceal ic feor ge neah
 mines felaleofan fæhðu dreogan.

Heht mec mon wunian on wuda bearwe,

A song I sing of sorrow unceasing,
 The tale of my trouble, the weight of my
 woe,
 Woe of the present, and woe of the past,
 Woe never-ending of exile and grief,
 But never since girlhood greater than now.
 First, the pang when my lord departed,
 Far from his people, beyond the sea;
 Bitter the heartache at break of dawn,
 The longing for rumor in what far land
 So weary a time my loved on tarried.
 Far I wandered then, friendless and
 homeless,
 Seeking for help in my heavy need.

With secret plotting his kinsmen purposed
 To wedge us apart, wide worlds between,
 And bitter hate. I was sick at heart.
 Harshly my lord bade lodge me here.

under actreo in þam eorðscræfe.
 Eald is þes eorðsele, eal ic eom oflongad,
 sindon dena dimme, duna uphea,
 bitre burgtunas, brerum beweaxne,
 wic wynna leas. Ful oft mec her wraþe begeat
 fromsiþ frean. Frynd sind on eorþan,
 leofe lifgende, leger weardiað,
 þonne ic on uhtan ana gonge
 under actreo geond þas eorðscrafu.
 Þær ic sittan mot sumorlangne dæg,
 þær ic wepan mæg mine wræcsipas,
 earfoþa fela; forþon ic æfre ne mæg
 þære modceare minre gerestan,
 ne ealles þæs longapes þe mec on þissum
 life begeat.

A scyle geong mon wesan geomormod,
 heard heortan geþoht, swylce habban sceal
 bliþe gebæro, eac þon breostceare,
 sinsorgna gedreag, sy æt him sylfum gelong
 eal his worulde wyn, sy ful wide fah
 feorres folclondes, þæt min freond siteð
 under stanhliþe storme behrimed,
 wine werigmod, wætre beflowen
 on dreorsele. Dreogeð se min wine
 micle modceare; he gemon to oft
 wynlicran wic. Wa bið þam þe sceal
 of langope leofes abidan

In all this land I had few to love me,
 Few that were loyal, few that were friends.
 Wherefore my spirit is heavy with sorrow
 To learn my beloved, my dear man and mate
 Bowed by ill-fortune and bitter in heart,
 Is masking his purpose and planning a
 wrong.

With blithe hearts often of old we boasted
 That nought should part us save death alone;
 All that has failed and our former love
 Is now as if it had never been!
 Far or near where I fly there follows
 The hate of him who was once so dear.

In this forest-grove they have fixed my
 abode

Under an oak in a cavern of earth,
 An old cave-dwelling of ancient days,
 Where my heart is crushed by the weight of

my woe.
 Gloomy its depths and the cliffs that
 o'erhang it,
 Grim are its confines with thorns
 overgrown—
 A joyless dwelling where daily the longing
 For an absent loved one brings anguish of
 heart.
 Lovers there are who may live their love,
 Joyously keeping the couch of bliss,
 While I in my earth-cave under the oak
 Pace to and fro in the lonely dawn.
 Here I must sit through the summer-long
 day,
 Here I must weep in affliction and woe;
 Yet never, indeed shall my heart know rest
 From all its anguish, and all its ache,
 Wherewith life's burdens have brought me
 low.
 Ever man's years are subject to sorrow,
 His heart's thoughts bitter, though his bearing
 be blithe;
 Troubled his spirit, beset with distress—
 Whether all wealth of the world be this lot,
 Or hunted by Fate in a far country
 My beloved is sitting soul-weary and sad,
 Swept by the storm, and stiff with the frost,
 In a wretched cell under rocky cliffs
 By severing waters encircled about—
 Sharpest of sorrows my lover must suffer
 Remembering always a happier home.
 Woeful his fate whose doom is to wait
 With longing heart for an absent love.

(translated by Charles W. Kennedy¹)

¹ Charles W. Kennedy trans, *An Anthology of Old English Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960) 10-11.

Appendix II

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In recent years Anglo-Saxonist scholars have widened the scope of their studies to include not only various aspects of Anglo-Saxon society and literature, but also, self-questioningly, their own discipline. Through an in-depth study of the scholarship on *The Wife's Lament* and *Wulf and Eadwacer*, this thesis examines the roles of these scholars in the critical history of the two poems. The poems are two of the most haunting and at the same time cryptic texts of the entire Old English corpus. Because of these characteristics, the research they inspire is wide-ranging, imaginative and sometimes provocative. The thesis focuses mainly on two aspects of scholarly research: the emergence of a professional identity among Anglo-Saxonist scholars and their choice of either a metaphoric or metonymic approach to the material. A final chapter studies the concomitant changes within Old English feminist studies.

Skrifter från moderna språk 5
Institutionen för moderna språk
Umeå universitet 2002
ISBN 91-7305-318-X
ISSN 1650-304X



Umeå universitet
901 87 Umeå
www.umu.se