The Images and Structure of The Wife's Lament

Alaric Hall

The Wife's Lament (hereafter WfL) has proved enigmatic for the best part of two centuries, and remains so. But critical perspectives on the poem continue to shift, and shed new light as they do so. For many years, scholars were principally concerned to unpick, through various means, the poem's allusive narrative first half, coping with even such fundamental issues as the number of men to whom WfL's speaker refers. However, most of those who have looked at WfL recently have concentrated on its more lyric second half, recognising that ignorance as to why the speaker is where she is, and indeed precisely what she is lamenting, does not deny us the appreciation of that lament's literary force. But it remains the case that the speaker's story is important to that appreciation, and the question of how many men are involved in her story is still fundamental. Michael Lapidge recently viewed the landscape depicted in WfL's second half as 'an object correlative of the speaker's emotions', suggesting that

Those critics who have attempted to visualise the relative positioning of the oak-tree and the cave have been frustrated, for the simple reason that the poet is describing a mental landscape, not a physical one; in its loneliness and desolation it is a visible embodiment of the narrator's invisible grief.¹

Emily Jensen has even argued that

From these literal associations [of eordscraef] we are left with a female speaker in "The Wife's Lament" who is either dead and speaking from the grave or is alive and living in a cave . . . I am not convinced . . . that either occurs in "The Wife's Lament".²

I do not deny the effectiveness of WfL's imagery as a metaphor for the speaker's state
of mind, nor the value of viewing the poem from a 'lyric' perspective. Indeed, focusing on the 'lyric' passage can offer means to help understand the preceding narrative passages: although some have recently been usefully adduced, there are numerous close analogues for the poem's imagery which have yet to be discussed in its context – offering not the literal associations of landscape which Jensen discards, but an approach to the literary ones which, it appears, the Anglo-Saxon audience knew. These analogues, I think, can shed considerable light on how we should understand both the imagery of *WfL*, and its narrative.

A further source of evidence for understanding *WfL* is its manuscript context, particularly the manuscript pointing. Tentative though one must be in reading the Exeter Book's punctuation, this can offer evidence for how we should attempt to read the poem's syntactic and formal structure, giving us perspectives on how we should understand it both in terms of its aesthetics and narrative.

We may frame our understanding of *WfL* as a woman's lament with Anglo-Saxon and English analogues, both verbal and thematic, dating from before and after *WfL*'s extant text. Pre-dating the Exeter Book is the right-hand panel of the Franks Casket, conventionally dated to the eighth century; the depiction on the panel 'has not been interpreted'. Fiona and Richard Gameson have noted the casket in this connection, but the analogue has yet to receive close consideration. The panel's inscription was edited by R. I. Page:

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Her Hos sitib on harmberga
agl[. ] drigip swa hiras Ertae gisgraf
sarden sorga and sefa torna.
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Page tentatively translated this as 'Here Hos sits on the sorrow-mound; she suffers distress in that Ertae had decreed for her a wretched den (?wood) of sorrows and torments of mind'. Interpretation is not straightforward – Page himself offers a subtly different alternative, and, for example, Hilda Ellis Davison pointed out that the first six runes could, on textual bases, be read just as well as *herh-os* ('a temple-deity') – but this seems essentially the most plausible explanation. The image of this inscription immediately resonates with *WfL*'s depiction of a woman who has been commanded to 'wunian on wuda bearwe / under actreo in þam eorðscæfe' ('dwell in a wooded grove / under an oak-tree, in the cave'), and although Page translated 'on harmberga' as 'on the sorrow-mound', it could also mean 'in the sorrow-mound'. The central scene of the panel is a horse, surrounded by foliage, standing on one side of what appears to be a mound, looking across to the face of a
man on the other side. The mound has a small figure inside it. However, on the far left hand side of the panel is a bestial human-figure sitting on a mound. Which mound the inscription refers to is clarified by the fact that each panel of the casket is designed either with an even bipartite division, or the referent of its inscription in the middle. The central figure of the right-hand panel, then, would seem to be Hos – in the sorrow-mound, just like the speaker of WfL.

There are a few words besides the main inscription, of which Page's summary should be sufficient: 'Above the horse's back is the word "risci" which ought to mean "rush, reed"; beneath its belly is "wudu", "wood"; over its head is "bita" which may be the name of the horse (Biter) or of the man facing it'. Wudu is of course a further detail which is present in WfL, perhaps reflected also in the carved foliage. A less clear link between the two texts is the element -den. Neither horse nor any other association with denn's common meaning, 'den, lair (of an animal)', is present in WfL. However, denn is also twice attested as 'grave' – an ambiguity reminiscent of WfL's eordscraef, which has a meaning of 'grave' secondary to its primary meaning of 'cave'. It is possible, moreover, that WfL's speaker is in a sacred grove, so it is interesting that denn is once used to gloss lucum ('a wood, grove, or thicket of trees sacred to a deity'), and that there is evidence for the association of horses and sacred groves elsewhere among the Germanic peoples. Tacitus in Germania chapter 10 associated horses with sacred groves:

proprium gentis equorum quoque praesagia ac monitus experiri. publice aluntur isdem nemoribus ac lucis, candidi et nullo mortali opere contacti

[But their [the Germans'] special divination is to make trial of the omens and warnings furnished by horses. In the same groves and coppices are fed certain white horses, never soiled by mortal use.]

A similar association appears in the Eddaic poem Háðskviða, preserved in Hervarar saga ok Heidreks konungs, but reckoned to be among the earliest eddaic poetry: 'var . . . í Húnamandi . . . mari vel töumum / á mórk inni helgu' ('There was . . . in the Hun-Kingdom . . . horse well-broken / in the holy forest').

As Battles has shown, the figure of the female lover being banished, or sent for sanctuary, to a subterranean location also appears in Middle English poetry, in Sir Tristrem and, portrayed at greater length than in Wace's Roman de Brut, in Laȝamon's Brut. Tristrem and Ysonde flee from King Mark to an 'erpe house' in a forest; King Locrine's lover Astrild is installed as his concubine in a luxurious cave outside
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London. Battles has chosen to see this figure in rather prosaic terms, noting numerous examples of the use of souterrains for sanctuary in Nordic prose; but its presence on the casket and in WfL surely represents a topos, and Hos's harmberg seems unlikely to be a souterrain. This combined evidence makes it likely that an Anglo-Saxon audience, presented with a woman in eordscrefe, would immediately have in mind a set of associations of love, banishment, paganism and sanctuary, regardless of any historical use of souterrains.

Middle English poetry also offers a remarkable verbal analogue for WfL. Among the earliest surviving Middle English secular lyrics is the well known chanson d'aventure, *Nu springes the sprai*, which involves a woman's lament. Its manuscript dates from around 1300. At the end of the first stanza, the lamenting mai cries 'Wai es him I louue-[[on]gi[n]ge / Sal libben ai' ('Woe is to the one who must live forever in love-longing'). This parallels WfL 52b-53, 'wa bið þam þe sceal / of langoþe leofes abidan' ('Woe must be to the one who must / in longing await love/a loved one'). *Nu springes* has a close Old French analogue, but 'Wai es him I louue-[[on]gi[n]ge / Sal libben ai' is unique to the English poem; moreover, taking -e in the text to be silent, these lines scan as an Old English alliterative line. It would appear to represent an element of a vernacular English frauenlied or 'lover's lament' form, surfacing in the surviving corpus only here and in WfL.

Comparable findings have been made by Joseph Harris, looking at earlier Germanic poetry. Harris perhaps put excessive weight on this, arguing for a common Germanic elegiac form, but this emphasis need not detract from some of his observations. He notes that 'The OE poem [WfL], like the German one [Hildebrandslied], focuses on the deserted woman's dwelling place' (as does the Franks Casket). He also found that 'There seems to be a significant bond . . . between the scene of elegiac discourse and the verb "to sit"', which we see in WfL 37. The figure appears in *Wulf and Eadwacer*, of course: 'ponne hit waes renig weder ond ic reotugu set' ('Then it was rainy weather and I sat weeping'). Besides in *Hildebrandslied*, there are several examples in the Poetic Edda, including Oddrínargráðr (stanza 13) and Guðrúnarhöf (stanza 9); there are impersonal and men's instances in *Deor* (lines 24, 28), and the themes of sitting and elegy are also present on the Franks casket. This evidence is a strong indicator that WfL is what its text, to modern readers, implies it to be: a vernacular woman's love-lament – though one with a substantial narrative content. It also suggests that intrinsic to the poem's fabric was a network of figures and phrases associated with such a form, invisible outside the vernacular context.

Before trying to reconstruct this context further, however, we must consider whether WfL was intended to stand alone, or if it was intended for an audience who
already knew the story to which it alludes. One could, in favour of the former idea, invoke the influence of material such as the *Song of Songs*, or Latin love-lyrics represented by the eleventh century Anglo-Saxon *Cambridge Songs* collection.\(^\text{18}\) This material contains lovers' laments which seem to allude to a narrative, but which nonetheless are in contexts where there is no such narrative. However, it seems more likely that *WfL*’s audience was expected to know the story; that such stories were in circulation is demonstrated by the Franks Casket. *WfL* line 9, the largely baffling ‘pa ic me feran gewat folgað secan’ ('Then/when I departed to go to seek (a) folgað') might be explicable by Latin influence, but its striking use of folgað, which 'appears to have been a legal term in OE, denoting the service due by a retainer to his lord', would be a very odd element to introduce unless in allusion to a known event; and the line can hardly be swept under the carpet, resonating as it does with lines 6 and 18 ('ærest min hlaford gewat heonan of leodum' and 'ða ic me ful gemficne monnan funde').\(^\text{19}\) Two interpretations of the events of line 9 are that the speaker sought the protection afforded by a lord-retainer relationship, or sought a euphemistically described lover; in either case, a measure of special pleading is necessary to get round contextual or semantic problems, and this seems best provided by assuming a narrative known to the poem's intended audience. *WfL*, like many of the lyrical poems of the Poetic Edda, was intended to be understood in a narrative context; and allusion thereto was clearly an important part of the poem.\(^\text{20}\)

Let us look more closely at *WfL*’s lyric imagery. The speaker's environment is depicted in lines 30-32a as

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Old English</th>
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<tr>
<td>dena dimme</td>
<td>duna uphea</td>
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<tr>
<td>bitre burgtunas</td>
<td>brerum beweaxne</td>
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<tr>
<td>wic wynna leas</td>
<td>a home without joys.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dim dales, tall hills,</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>bitter burgtunas overgrown with briars,</td>
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As I have said, the 'object-correlative' approach to this, whereby the speaker's gloomy surroundings are a pathetic fallacy, is reasonable and useful. 'It could', indeed, 'be said that her mind, like the surrounding valleys is *dimme* and *brerum beweaxne*.\(^\text{21}\) It is also the case that the briars are unique in surviving Old English poetry. Leslie noted that 'Briars, thorns and brambles are similarly used as elegiac motifs in early Welsh and Irish poetry'; another parallel would be Gawain's description of the Green Chapel in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, line 2190: 'Pis oritore is vgly, with erbez ouergrown'.\(^\text{22}\) The evidence for interaction between Anglo-Saxon and Celtic vernacular poetries is slight, and the image can certainly be taken as a polygenetic representation of long-term human abandonment, bearing a pathetic fallacy. On the
other hand, it is at least of interest that the other associations of the Green Chapel – which is a mound in the wilderness, 'hol3 inwith, nobot an olde caue' ('hollow within, just an old cave', line 2182), the 'corsedest kyrk' ('most accursed church', line 2196), and a fitting place for the appearance of the devil (lines 2185-2196) – correlate rather well with other associations which may be established for the description of the speaker's location quoted.

It is important in this context to recognise that images focusing on landbound natural scenes are very rare in Old English poetry; while, nonetheless, line 30 has an Old English analogue in *The Pheonix* lines 21-26. This describes Paradise with, amongst other statements:

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beorgas þære ne muntas
steape ne stonadað ne stan clifu
heah hlifsað swa her mid us
ne dene ne dalu ne dun scrafu
hlæwas ne hlincas ne þære hleonað
 oo unsmêpes wiht
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Neither hills nor mountains
stand there, steep, nor do stone-cliffs
tower high, as here among us,
nor valleys nor dales nor dim hollows,
mounds nor rises, nor does any rough thing
thing lie there.

All this translates Lactantius's 'Nee tumulus crescit nec cava vallis hiat' ('Neither mound rises nor does hollow valley gape'), and while such expansion is not uncommon in *The Pheonix*, the poet's interest in this scene is still worthy of note. To this comparison may be added the possible connotations of 'wic wynna leas', paralleled later in *WfL* in the speaker's description of her *freond* as remembering a 'wynlicran wic' ('more joyful home'). Phrases comparable to these occur twice elsewhere in the Old English corpus, in *Beowulf* line 821 and *Genesis A* line 928. *Beowulf* 's 'wynleas wic' ('joyless home') refers to Grendel's home, widely supposed to represent a hell-on-earth, and *Genesis* 's 'wynleasran wic' ('more joyless home') describes the world to which Adam, fallen from paradise, is to be banished. Perspectives on *dimme* are offered by Jean Ritzke-Rutherford:

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In keeping with the natural psychological and metaphysical associations coupled with light and darkness . . . and firmly anchored in Biblical and homiletic writing, light in OE poetry is equated with good, while darkness stands for evil and even death.
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These parallels to lines 30-32a give us the context in which the speaker's location seems to have been understood – it seems rather precisely to be an anti-paradise,
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connoting hell. To one person, the lines could have been primarily Christian images; to another, perhaps, traditional images whose Christian associations were secondary; but either way, the essential idea seems clear.

The bitre burgtunas have recently been re-examined by P. R. Orton, and there is little point in raking over the various suggestions as to what they may be. Orton chose to read burg as 'home', thus 'bitter home-enclosures' ('home' being ironic). But to read the compound literally, as 'bitter defence-enclosures', may be perfectly appropriate, if the speaker's unpleasant location is also her sanctuary. Whatever the meaning of the compound, this literal interpretation would work as paronomasia. However, the fact that Hos was 'on harmberga', 'in/on a sorrow-hill/barrow', provides an important analogue for the bitre burgtunas. Burg and be(o)rg were often confused in Late West Saxon; to cite some poetic examples, Exodus uses burhhlæodu (line 70) of the wall of water, and burgum (line 222) as 'hills', and recent editors read burgleolpum in Riddle 27 (line 2) as 'mountain slopes'. 'Bitter barrow-enclosures' is a simple and appropriate reading of bitre burgtunas, in a stroke removing the difficulties of the compound and illuminating the character of the eordscrafu in which the speaker situates herself.

It may be that we can improve our understanding of burgtunas, moreover, by noting the context which the speaker gives it in lines 15 and 27:

het mec hlaford min  her/heard niman  My lord commanded me to her/heard niman
heht mec mon wunian  on wuda bearwe  A person commanded me to dwell in a wooded grove

Heretheard (crossing a line break in the manuscript) is a notorious crux, and its meaning is important to interpreting WfL's narrative. There is no need to rehearse the debate over its meaning, which is ongoing; only to note that an attractive and common reading is herh-eard, hypothesising a compound of an Anglian smoothed form of the attested West-Saxon hearthle(a)rg, 'a place sacred to a god, with an idol and an altar . . . a grove', and the construction eard niman, 'to take up an abode'.

One well-known context for a herg is that of Beowulf, lines 3071-73. The Geats swear

hæt se sceg wære  synnum scildig  that that man should be guilty with sins
hergum geheæderod  hellbendum fæst  confined to hergs, to fast hell-bonds,
wommum gewitnad  se ðone wong  tormented with evils, who plundered that
For these hellish connotations to be found in *WfL* would be wholly consonant with the other evidence regarding the speaker's location. The combination of mound, sacred place and sanctuary is also attested in history, in a runic inscription at Oklunda in Östergötland (southern Sweden). The inscription, apparently dating from the ninth century, was cut on a rock on a knoll. The latter part of the inscription is obscure, but the opening reads: kunar : fapirunarpisar : insa flausakar : sutiupita. That is, Gunnarr fadi runar ðessar. En sa flo sakr. Sotti vi ðetta . . ., translated by Jansson (himself translated by Foote) to mean 'Gunnar cut these runes. And he fled under penalty. Sought this sanctuary. . .'. Southern Sweden was geographically distant from Anglo-Saxon England, but the lands were culturally close, both in origin, and as part of the North Sea littoral. Indeed, on the evidence of *Beowulf*, the eyes of Anglo-Saxon poets were fastly on that region.

These considerations, then, may inform us about the general location of the speaker of *WfL*. Her remaining comments on her abode stress two further elements: the actreo and the eordscraf, first mentioned in line 28, and then reiterated in 36, both times in clear association. It is very hard to dismiss this as Lapidge's 'mental landscape' – it is too specific and its implications as a 'visible embodiment of the narrator's invisible grief' too obscure. As I have already suggested, it is also hard to understand it by Battles's literal approach: 'Some critics have read this [herheard] as an indication that the structure is a pagan shrine, but there is a more humbly realistic reason why the narrator might emphasise the trees, namely because they are dominant features of the landscape surrounding her dwelling'. This may be so; but she does not emphasise the trees, but rather an oaktree, under which the eordscraf lies. So let us explore the literary associations of these elements, and their coupling.

The semantics of *eordscraf* have been extensively studied, so I shall not go over them again here. The speaker also refers to the place with 'eald is bes eordsele' ('this earth-hall is old'). The character of an *eordsele* has been considered by Hume, who found the 'earth-hall' here to be an 'anti-hall' – it thus behaves contrariwise to the hall in Old English poetry, which represents 'a circle of light and peace enclosed by darkness, discomfort and danger' and 'the social system associated with it'. *Eald* must have been meant to add to or modify these associations. Leslie argued that the word implies the *eordsele* to be man-made, and the *eordsele* in *Beowulf* (the word's only other attestation) and Tristrem's *erpe house* are both portrayed as the products of a civilisation long past and mysterious: 'Etynes bi old dayn / Had wrouȝt it' ('Giants in old days had made it'; cf. *Beowulf* lines 2717b-2719). Significantly, both poems
emphasise hereby the caves' pre-Christian origins. The speaker's cave in WfL seems, then, to be not any old anti-hall, but one with a concise pointer to these further associations, of the hellish, and the time before Christianity.

The collocation of the actreo and eordscraf would remain obscure, but for their striking analogues, not only from Nordic prose and Middle English, but the Bible and the Poetic Edda; though, admittedly, WfL is the only instance where precisely these two elements are specifically combined, so interpreting the collocation must remain difficult. S. A. J. Bradley has observed that 'The oak . . . is confined mainly to the Old Testament, where it is regularly associated with sanctuaries, altars and graves, or symbolises worldly splendour humbled in the day of the Lord's retribution'.

'Regularly associated' is excessive – there are, for example, only two instances of graves at oak trees (Genesis 35. 8; I Chronicles 10. 12), though cave-burials are also found (e.g. Genesis 49. 29). Even so, all the associations Bradley lists are present, some fitting particularly well into the context of WfL. Ezekiel 6. 13 says that

fuerint interfecti vestri in medio idolorum vestrorum in circuitu ararum vestrarum in omni colle excelso in cunctis summitatibus montium et subtus omne lignum nemorosum et subtus universam quercum frondosam locum ubi accenderunt tura redolentia universis idolis suis

[your slain men will have been among your idols, round about your altars on every high hill, in all the tops of mountains and beneath every leafy tree and beneath every leafy oak, the place where they offered pungent incense to all their idols.]

Caves also feature widely in the Old Testament as dwellings and places of escape; indeed, when Lot flees Zoar to dwell in a cave (Genesis 19. 30), Genesis A uses eordscraf (line 2597). Oak-trees could also be associated with legitimate altars (e.g. Joshua 24. 26), but otherwise these references demonstrate a similar range of associations to those which we might already suppose in WfL – of pagan religion, and refuge. An audience with no more than a knowledge of Genesis could have perceived the location of WfL's speaker largely in Biblical terms to be associated with damnable ways of life, though, that said, I see no reason to seek here distinct 'pagan' or 'Christian' layers in WfL: each may have taken on elements of the other, in the poetic tradition, or in individual members of the poem's audience.

The possibility of a direct line of Biblical influence on Old English poetry is clear. Comparisons between Old English poetry and the Poetic Edda are more
hazardous. Even so, links are clear – verbally, for example, between The Seafarer (lines 72-73) and The Wanderer (lines 108-09) and Hávamál (stanzas 76-77); and thematically, perhaps most strikingly, between Deor (1-13), the Franks Casket and Völundarkviða. How far such connections should be perceived as being cognate, and how far due to later sharing of ideas between the Anglo-Saxons and the Scandinavians is a significant consideration; but the presence of links remains sure, and hopefully sufficient for the present purpose.

In the Poetic Edda, subterranean locations are associated with prophetesses and giantesses, and also with death (Völsespán stanza 66, Baldrs Draumar 2, Hyndluljóð 1 and Helreið Brynhildar 1, 3, 14). More strikingly, the analogues also associate places of death with the roots of a tree, twice with regard to giantesses. One, as Orton pointed out, is Skírnismál. In the course of thirteen stanzas of threats which Skírnir extends in his attempts to woo Gerðr for Freyr, Skírnir suggests that

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Ara þúfo á} \\
\text{scaltu ár sitia,} \\
\text{horva heimi ór,} \\
\text{snugga heliar til}
\end{align*}
\]

On an eagle's mound
you shall sit from early morning,
looking out of the world,
hankering towards hell

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Hrímgrímnir heitir þurs,} \\
\text{er þic hafa scal,} \\
\text{fyr nágrindr neðan;} \\
\text{þar þér vílmegir} \\
\text{á viðar rótom} \\
\text{geita hland gefi!}
\end{align*}
\]

Hrímgrímnir is the name of the giant
who'll have you
down below the corpse-gates,
where bondsmen will give you
at the roots of the wood
goat's piss to drink.

(Stanzas 27, 35)\(^1\)

Another parallel is provided by Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar stanza 16, in which Atli curses the giantess Hríngerdr:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{nó roðtom} \\
\text{er þú scyldir neðarr vera,} \\
\text{oc vaxi þér á badmi barr!}
\end{align*}
\]

You ought to be nine leagues
underground
with fir-trees growing from your breast!

Much the same association occurs in Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks. Hervör goes to the burial mound of her father Angantýr, declaring
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Vek ek yðr alla
undir viðar rótum.\textsuperscript{12}

From the roots of the tree
I arouse you all

The associations of trees and the subterranean in the Poetic Edda seem to be death, and curses upon females; and their own nature implies that the topos has pagan associations. Admittedly, the females in question are rarely human, and it is the trees' roots which are emphasised, but presumably the analogy with Old English poetry stands – the associations are quite consonant with the material from the Franks Casket. Combining the Biblical material and previous discussions, we may tentatively suppose that in \textit{WfL} the speaker's location was envisaged as caves within a burial mound, or at least a mound to which the poem is trying to give connotations of death, surrounded by an enclosure which is overgrown with briars. The place had associations with paganism, set in a dim landscape of almost hellish grimness. As Ritzke-Rutherford has said, 'If the greatest joy of poets and Christians is the brightness of Paradise, the greatest loss of the damned is to be cut off from that light'.\textsuperscript{43}

But none of this quite accounts for \textit{WfL}'s insistence upon an actreo. Unfortunately, there is only one comparable Eddaic instance of an oak-tree, which Kershaw adduced from stanza six of the Flateyjarbók text of \textit{Helreið Brynhildar}.\textsuperscript{44}

Lét mig af harmi
hugfullr konungr
Atla systur
undir æik búa\textsuperscript{45}

In sorrow the courageous king
made me,
the sister of Atli,
to dwell beneath an oak

along with its generally preferred memorial variant from the \textit{Codex Regius},

Lét hamí vára
hugfullr konungr,
áttu systra,
undir eic borit

The wise king had our
magic garments –
eight sisters we were together –
put under an oak.

In contrast with the material of the Franks Casket, this seems to point towards the speaker's oak-tree as primarily a place of sanctuary, rather than banishment – though, of course, the two phenomena may be closely associated, in both narrative and emotional terms. Likewise, sanctuary is the principal force of Battles's Nordic analogues, and, as it seems to me, his Middle English analogues too.

These analogues are crucial to interpreting \textit{WfL}'s narrative. Banishment might
obviously be explained by adultery, if ingenuity overcomes the suggestion that both hlaford and mon would seem to banish the speaker to the same place; whereas placing the speaker in sanctuary would be more simply understood as the deed of one, concerned, husband. Admittedly, the lost story is not guaranteed to have been as simple as these suggestions imply; but to aim for simplicity is a sound policy from which to start. WfL's predominantly narrative first half, wherein further perspectives on this problem can be found, is hard to interpret, and debate as to how the poem should be verse-paragraphed, its sentences divided, and their sequence interpreted, fill its critical history. As an example, let us note lines 9-11:

\[
\text{ða ic me feran gewat folgð secan} \\
\text{wineleas wrecce for minre weþearfe-} \\
\text{ongunnon þæt þæs monnes magas hycgan}
\]

Should ða here be taken to imply 'When on account of my woeful plight I went wandering, a friendless exile, to find a following, the man's kindred plotted . . .', or 'Then I set out on my way, friendless and homeless to seek for support in my sore need. // The man's relatives had secretly cast about . . .'? This is a problem to which I shall return.

WfL's larger structure is likewise problematical, but there are two points of consensus. One is the discreteness of lines 1-5, defined by the aural envelope of wrecce . . . sið (lines 1-2) and wraecsipa (line 5); the fact that the first four lines are a syntactic and thematic unit, with 5 a complimentary gnomic statement; and the contrast between the present tenses of 1-5 and the preterites which follow. Scholars also agree that 42-53 are a unit. They end with langope, which parallels longapes in 41; and they comprise a shift from the speaker's (indicative) description of her own present situation, to some kind of (partly subjunctive) portrayal of geong mon, min freond, enveloped by two gnomes. With these divisions, however, consensus ends. To survey three interpretations: Richard Hamer grouped lines 6-26 and 27-41; S. A. J. Bradley divided this further, into 6-14, 15-26 and 27-41; while R. F. Leslie, perhaps wisely, avoided crystallising the structure by allowing the text numerous divisions: 6-14, 15-17, 18-26, 27-29 and 30-41, interpreted by D. R. Howlett to imply 'a prologue of five lines (1-5) and four sections of twelve lines'.

One approach to reading WfL's structure which does not demand the prejudging of the lost narrative is to examine aurally and semantically interrelating lines, as did Jane L. Curry, though she did not push her observations as far as she might. But another is to adduce the poem's manuscript punctuation. This is not, of course, a
simple matter – the pointings of the Exeter Book seem to be used in a bewildering variety of syntactic contexts, but are clearly not intended merely to mark the metre as they do in the Junius manuscript, being too infrequent. Even so, an understanding of the punctuation can be approached. Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe offered as a hypothetical general principle, 'a point means a pause. Use whenever necessary'.

M. B. Parkes, in a wider context, has also argued that 'Medieval scribes and correctors punctuate where confusion is likely to arise . . . and do not always punctuate where confusion is not likely to arise'.

Pointings fall in WfL lines 8, 10, 14, 17, 22, 28, 29, 37 and 40. Apart from that in 37, they each fall at the end of a b-verse. The majority could be read as modern full stops, though not those in 22, 37, and 40, which should be considered first.

Line 37 runs 'þær ic sittam mot sumorlangne- þæg' ('There I may sit the summer-long day'). The pointing here is hard to attribute to anything other than a mistake. It might be explained by the fact that -langne is written over an erasure, which has left a large gap after the word, into which the scribe might have inserted the point by way of a space-filler, or mark of error. Whatever its interpretation, however, it seems unlikely to bear on how we should read the line.

The point in line 22 may be considered in the context of 21b-23:

ful oft wit beotedan Often indeed the two of us vowed
þæt unc ne gedælde nemne deað ana-
owiht elles eft is þæt onhworfen nothing else. Again has it changed
that nothing should part us except death alone-
awiht elles is preceded by a point, as in Vainglory lines 64-65, Judgement Day I lines 1-2, and, to quote, The Seafarer 79-80:

awa to ealdre ecan lifes blæd-
dream mid duge/pum dagas sind
for ever and ever the glory of eternal life-
gewitene53 joy among companies. Days have
departed

The point at the end of line 40 seems simply to be a rhetorical pause without the finality of a full stop:
Alaric Hall

forpon ic æfre ne mæg
pære modceare minre gerestan·
ne ealles þæs longapes þe mec on þissum
life beget

Therefore I can never
rest from that spirit-trouble of mine:
nor from all the longing which (has) seized
me in this life

Of the other pointings, several coincide with aurally resonant lines, emphasising O'Keeffe's linking of the pointings with rhetorical pauses. Lines 9 and 18, which parallel the verse-paragraph opening in 6, follow points; likewise, line 14's longade, seen elsewhere in WfL to be an ending-word, is immediately followed by a point. Line 29, 'eald is þes cordanæl eal ic eom oflongad' ('This earth-hall is old; I suffer longing throughout myself'), is followed by a point, and can be read as a conclusive line, especially given its gnomic tone.

Reading these points as something like full stops, the text can be seen to demarcate the episodic progression of lines 6-17. Reading the points thus, and assuming that the episodes are in chronological order (they open, after all, with ærest, followed in the next section by ða), difficulty in interpreting, for example, lines 9-11 (quoted above), is apparently resolved, the pointing dividing 9-10 from 11 and following. The speaker's lord departed and she suffered uhtceare ('troubles in the twilight-before-dawn') over his whereabouts. Then she set off because of her weapærf (woeful-need). Pæs monnes ('that person's') kinsmen began to plot that the two be parted; and mec longade ('and I suffered longing'). Her lord commanded her to herheard niman; forpon is min hyge geumor ('therefore is my heart sorrowful').

It is possible to push the evidence of pointing further. At the end of line 17 (forpon is min hyge geumor), with the ends of the metrical and manuscript lines almost coinciding, the scribe placed 17's point squarely in the middle of the eleven millimetres left to him, and wrote ða, the first word of line 18, on the next line. Admittedly, ða as written covers a centimetre, so one cannot make too much of the detail; but the manuscript's declaration of a break after line 17 remains visually striking. This emphasises Howlett's passing suggestion that, in our text of WfL, the verse-paragraph following the prologue was intended to be read as 6-17 - twelve lines - and that one can read 6-53 as four twelve-line verse-paragraphs. Line 29, the last of the second twelve-line group, happens also to be the last line on the recto, ending with the manuscript line. The break at 42 is, as I have described, evident enough without punctuation. Aurally, this arrangement is effective. It divides the poem into stanzas of past tense – past tense – present tense – present tense. Line 15's Het mec hla ford . . . parallels line 27's heht mec mon . . . , each introducing a three-line coda to its stanza. The two lists characterising a mon (lines 18-21a and 42-45b) may now
be read each to comprise the first four lines of a verse-paragraph.  

Admittedly, however, this sort of stanzaic form is not the norm for the surviving Old English poetry. In a way, this supports the reading: a scribe has inserted pointings where the unusualness of the form might confuse the reader. However, with our uncertainty regarding the intended functions of the pointings, some other evidence is required. Certainly, WfL is not stanzaic in the same way that Deor is, with its irregular stanzas, each opened with a capital and concluded with a gnomic refrain and heavy manuscript punctuation. Nor is it much like the Rune Poem, with its 3- and 4-line stanzas. But a strong comparison is afforded by The Wanderer, which has a five-line introduction ending with a gnomic phrase, and can be read in four very nearly equal sections (lines 1-29a; 29b-57; 58-84; 85-115).\(^\text{55}\) The Wanderer includes its introduction in its count, but is nonetheless closely analogous to the structure of WfL which I read.

This reading again has implications for our understanding of the story to which the speaker alludes. It may help to crystallise the meaning of *da* in line 18, '6a ic me ful gemæcne monnan funde' ('da I found myself a fully matched person') – 'then' or 'when'? In simpler circumstances than those of WfL, one would assume 'when', as the placing of the verb at the end of a phrase is usually associated with subordinate clauses.\(^\text{56}\) If line 18 were to be associated with the episodic progression that has gone before, by dividing the verse-paragraphs later, or, say, at line 15, then it might best be included as a 'then', perhaps giving a scheme like this: 'first my lord departed . . . then I set out . . . relatives began to consider . . . my lord commanded me to dwell . . . then I found myself a fully matched person . . .'. But the stanzaic structure favours 'when'. The narrative scheme of stanza one, starting with the lord's departure and ending with the speaker's banishment, concludes. The narrator then focuses on her relationship with her *hlaford*, starting 'when' 'ic me ful gemæcne monnan funde'. This eliminates the difficulty which may be had in perceiving one character to be referred to so contrastively as both *hlaford* and *mon* – assuming that both parties had to meet before they could enter the relationship whereby the man should be a *hlaford*, then the speaker can do little but refer to him as a *mon* at this contrastively early juncture in her story.\(^\text{57}\)

According to this reading, one can consider WfL's prologue a stanza-by-stanza synopsis of the rest of the poem.\(^\text{58}\) Here is the prologue in full:

\[
\text{Ic þis giedd wrece} \quad \text{bi me ful geomorre} \quad \text{I declare this poem about myself}
\]
\[
\text{minre sylfre sîd} \quad \text{Ic þæt secgan mæg} \quad \text{completely sad, my self's journey. I can say it,}
\]
\[
\text{hwæt ic yrmpa gebad} \quad \text{sîþan ic up weox} \quad \text{what I have experienced of hardships since I}
\]
niwes oppe ealdes no ma þonne nu
grew up, niwes oppe ealdes, no more than now.
a ic wite wonn minra wræcsipa
Always must I suffer the torment of my exile-journeys.

The declarations that the speaker is ful geomorre, and that she means to speak minre sylfre sið, tell the audience that she is a woman, but prompt them to wonder why she is geomor, and what has been her sið. Accordingly, in the first stanza (6-17), she answers them, with the story of her misfortunes. 'Forpon', she explains, 'is min hyge geomor'. In stanza two (18-29) she becomes more specific, as in lines 2b-4a. The implications of 'sippan ic up weox' are unclear; it could simply mean 'since I grew up', but it could plausibly be a euphemism for her marriage. Either way, it points to a time of or before the speaker's union with her hlaþord, thus before the events of stanza one. 'Niwes oppe ealdes' is a slightly odd formulation – niwra oppe ealdra ('new or old') would have been the more obvious way of qualifying yrmpa gebad. As it stands, the phrase could be read to mean 'of a new man or an old man'. However, I would read it as an adverbial phrase meaning 'recently or of old'. Genitives are almost certainly adverbial in londes in line 8 and in feorres folclondes in lines 46b-47a, so there is nothing intrinsically unlikely about the adverbial reading. 'Niwes oppe ealdes' ties in with the second stanza: lines 24-25a, 'is nu swa hit no wasre / freondscipe uncer' ('the friendship of the two of us / is now as though it never were') points with nu towards the recent past; while line 18, 'ða ic me ful gemaecne monnan funde' ('when I found myself a fully matched man'), I would argue, implies a more distant past. This is then contrasted with a statement of the speaker's present – in the introduction with 'no ma þonne nu' ('no more than now'), and in the poem with the third stanza (30-41), the vivid vignette of how things sindon ('are'). Finally, the introduction makes its gnomic declaration of 'a ic wite wonn minra wræcsipa' ('I have always suffered the torment of my exile-journeys'), paralleled by the gnomic lines in stanza four (42-53), which, though not explicitly regarding the speaker, implicitly represent her feelings.

Combining these considerations, then – punctuation, structure, and analogues – I should like finally to re-examine the second half of the poem, the third and fourth stanzas. I have examined above stanza three's portrayal of the speaker's location; elsewhere in the stanza, the speaker concentrates less on her location and more on her feelings, and the poetry, for a modern reader, seems to speak more for itself. This is perhaps deceptive – it is likely that the Anglo-Saxon audience could recognise and appreciate the speaker's adoption of appropriate elegiac (indeed perhaps women's elegiac) postures, as in sittam in lines 37-38:
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Jensen has argued that with the turning of its thoughts to other lovers in 'frynd sind on eorðan / leofe lifgende leger weardiað' in lines 33b-34, and the motion implied in 'ponne ic on uhtan ana gonge / under acro geond þas eorðscrafu' ('then I wander alone in the twilight-before-dawn / under an oaktree throughout these caves') in lines 35-36, the speaker's mind frees itself from the machinations of external forces, leading in stanza four to a 'mind in control of itself, able to "resist its surroundings"' – only without 'the philosophic overlay of Sfr [The Seafarer] or Wan [The Wanderer]'.

Jensen's reading is not unattractive. Kershaw noted regarding 'sumorlangne· dæg' that 'Imelmann believes that a contrast to uhtan is intended'. This, read in conjunction with the earlier dimme, implies a progression from night to day, and dark into light. However, other considerations militate against the reading. In the first place, 'Frynd sind on eorðan . . . .' is not to be taken unquestioningly to mean 'friends are on the earth, / living beloved they lie in beds' (as Jensen takes it), since it could also mean 'friends are in the earth, / beloved while living, they lie in graves'. Critics of WfL have consistently taken one or the other of these readings, as Jensen does, and ignored the alternative possibility, despite the fact that both interpretations have been in publication since 1859. However, the uncertainty seems now to have been resolved: Kathryn A. Lowe's detailed semantic and syntactic study has shown that the reading which Jensen chooses here is in fact implausible, and that the line must mean, to quote her translation, 'There are friends, dear ones dwelling in the earth, they inhabit graves'. I have emphasised the likely associations of caves under trees, while Jensen herself recognises that on uhtan is a 'conventional image of . . . the time when one's sorrow is at its peak'; moreover, wandering seems also to be an elegiac motif. This combination, then, seems unlikely to have symbolised a progression towards stoicism to a vernacular audience. Far more striking to my mind is the characterisation in the ironic use of motan and magan in lines 37-38 – a tone of bitterness and anger which is not philosophical, but does toughen a lament which could have become self-pitying.

The speaker ends this verse-paragraph with lines 39b-41:

Therefore I may sit the summer-long day
There I am able to weep (for) my exile-journeys.

Therefore I can never
rest from that spirit-trouble of mine:
nor from all the longing which (has) seized
me in this life
The last line is desperately crowded – its b-line contains the largest number of initial unstressed syllables apparently permitted in Old English metre, all of which are short and none of which except perhaps mec has even very great lexical stress to slow the line down.\textsuperscript{67} The line contains significant extra-metrical alliteration and assonance, on \textit{p}, \textit{l}, and \textit{ea}, and is apparently emphasised by the punctuation. While caution is required in making assumptions about Old English rhetorical style, this line certainly does not seem calm, and can easily be supposed to be desperate.

It is after this that the speaker's thoughts really turn outwards, for the last passage of the poem (lines 42-53). Now she considers the situation of another person. The stanza begins with

\begin{quote}
\begin{tabular}{ll}
\textit{a scyle geong mon} & \textit{wesan geomormod} \\
\textit{heard heortan gepoht} & \textit{swylyc habban sceal} \\
\textit{blipe gebæro} & \textit{eac þon breostceare} \\
sinsorgna gedrea\textsuperscript{g} & \\
\end{tabular}
\end{quote}

Always must a young person be sad-minded, hard the heart's thought, likewise must (he) have a blithe demeanour, moreover heart-trouble, a multitude of continual-sorrows

Line 42 is a gnomic line – \textit{geong mon} could be any young person. 42-45b is mainly of A-rhythms, with markedly more lexical stresses than metrical, and a high ratio of lexically stressed syllables to unstressed, and of long syllables to short. It seems steady, in marked contrast to line 41. The parallel passage of lines 18-21a runs

\begin{quote}
\begin{tabular}{ll}
\textit{ða ic me ful gemæcne} & \textit{monnan funde} \\
\textit{heardsælign} & \textit{hygegeormorne} \\
\textit{mod mipendne} & \textit{morþor hygende} \\
\textit{blipe gebæro} & \\
\end{tabular}
\end{quote}

When I found myself a fully matched man, ill-blessed, sad-minded, (his) heart dissembling, thinking on violent death, with blithe demeanour

Comparing these passages suggests that the speaker means lines 42-45b to apply particularly to the 'ful gemæcne monnan', and gives us an insight into his character: the speaker's demands in 42-45a, compared with the description earlier, in 18-21a, imply a fairly subtle distinction between how the \textit{mon} is and how he should be. Given that the \textit{mon} is \textit{gemæcne}, that 42 is gnomic, and that the descriptions resonate with the speaker's description of herself as \textit{geomorre}, they must apply to her as well as her \textit{mon}. But perhaps more revealing are the changes between the two passages. In 18-21a, an ostensibly optimistic start is undercut in a barrage of adjectives and participles; but in 42-45a, the pace is steady, the understanding extended from the descriptive to the prescriptive, 'mod mipendne morþor hycgende' exorcised. 'Blipe gebæro' is now perhaps representative more of stoicism than dissembling. Likewise,
the final gnomic line of the poem seems to imply a character with this sort of control: it has an steadily logadoeic rhythm, both in terms of length and stress. Although it was presumably not composed specifically for *WfL*, it has been selected for the job, and its character is therefore significant. The last phrase, 'wa bid ðam þe sceal / of langope leofes abidan' (lines 52b-53) would appear emotive, but not the cry of one completely overcome – the speaker is becoming wiser (though not resigned). Between these gnomic passages, however – lines 42-45a, and lines 52b-53 – the syntax of the stanza becomes debatable, in lines 45b-52a. Quite how we should understand this is an issue I consider below, so the translation I offer is a possibility conforming to the interpretation I shall argue:

sy ðæt him sylfum gelong belonging to himself or whether it is that, eal his worulde wyn sy ful wide fah outcast everywhere in a far country, my friend feorres folclondes þæt min freond sithe sits, under a stone-cliff, frosted by storm, under stanhlype storme behrimed a spirit-worn friend surrounded by water wine werigmod wætre befloweren in a sorrow/gore-hall, that friend of mine on dreorsele dreogeð se min wine suffers great spirit-trouble, he recalls too wynlicran wic often a more joyful home.

It seems remarkable that the stanza contains no punctuation at all. Given the suggestion by Parkes noted above, this absence would seem to imply that the vernacular audience found the stanza's rhetorical structure transparent. I favour, therefore, a reading which invokes the minimum of syntactic complexity and disjunction. This policy disfavours an interpretation of lines 45b-47a like Hamer's 'All earthly joy / Must come from his own self. Since my dear lord / Is outcast . . .' 68 Recent opinion has tended strongly towards reading these lines as a 'whether . . . or' construction, rather than taking *sy* as an imperative; and a priori, 'sy ðæt him sylfum gelong / eal his worulde wyn' seems an odd curse, especially in what otherwise seems to be a non-Christian context. Moreover, the 'whether . . . or . . .' reading demands no syntactic break as great as a modern full stop between 42 and 52b.69

It is also unclear whether the *þæt* clause is dependent on both *sy* clauses, or only the second (which is how I have taken it above). However, we might improve our understanding of the syntax by looking at the content of the *þæt* clause. Klinck, in her edition of the Old English elegies, called the content of lines 47b-51a 'a vague dismal location'.70 But far stronger and more specific associations may have been recalled by the passage. The situation seems much like the 'Cliff of Death' topos

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identified by Fry: the 'motif includes four basic elements: cliffs, serpents, darkness, and deprivation, and occasionally wolves and wind'. The Cliff of Death was associated with hell, as in Judith 111b-21, which, in a description absent from the Latin original, describes the departure of Holofernes's spirit; or St. Paul's vision of hell, described in Blickling Homily XVI. Comparisons with the portrayals of Hel in Völuspá and Snorra Edda, which connect closely with the 'Cliff of Death' topos, are also possible, but the Christian ones seem distinct enough for the present purpose. I have already mentioned the apparent hellish connotations of wynlicran wic. Moreover, as Schaefer pointed out, the description also recalls Matthew 7. 26-27:

et omnis qui audit verba mea haec et non facit ea similis erit viro stulto qui aedificavit domum suam supra harenam et descendit pluvia et venerunt flumina et flaverunt venti et inruerent in domum illam et cecidit et fuit ruina eius magna

[And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act accordingly will be like the foolish man who built his home on the sand; and the rains fell and the floods came and the winds blew and beat upon that home, and it collapsed, and great was its downfall.]

These analogues suggest for us the extremity of the nadir threatening the wine, whether read through Old English poetry or the Bible: it is more than a 'dismal location' which he seems to face. They also suggest that the clause is dependent only on 'sy ful wide fah' and following. Not only does 'sy æt him sylfum gelong eal his worulde wyn' ostensibly say 'whether things are going well for him', but even if it did imply ill, it would be very hard to interpret it to govern the poet clause while still having it contrast with sy ful wide fah ... as 'whether ... or' demands. Alain Renoir has suggested that the wine has suffered a catastrophic inversion ... in his condition. Thus considered, the process reads like an illustration of the familiar New Testament assertion that the Lord "deposit potentes de sede . . ." . . . apprehension thereof must unavoidably affect the impact of the narrative on a Christian audience.
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The speaker may also be implying a different kind of catastrophe. Given the hellish appearance of the wine's prospect in 46b-50a, and the curious expression of 45a-46a, perhaps the speaker is essentially saying 'whether he is alive, or dead (such that . . .), my friend suffers'. 'Wa bið þam þe sceal / of langope leofes abidan' ('Woe must be to the one who must / in longing await love/a loved one'), and a man in hell must abidan forever – just as, the speaker feels, she must. Her indirect expression of her langop allows her to impart to it the force of analogy with the eternal torments of hell, without risking bathos. For a Christian audience, these associations may again have thrown WfL and the woes it depicts into the context of a pagan time.76

It seems to me most likely that there is only one man in WfL: the principal force of the comparatively full Biblical, Middle English, and Norse prose analogues is to imply that the speaker's location is a sanctuary, and there is no need to suppose two men to have sent her there. The cultural and chronological proximity of the Franks Casket analogue means that implications of banishment cannot be dismissed; but such connotations may manifest themselves quite easily as a strong secondary aspect to a primary implication of sanctuary. This reading is supported if one is to consider line 18 to start with 'when', as seems most likely if it is the opening of a verse-paragraph, as it would imply the mon and hlaford to be identical, rather than different as 'then' in that position would tend to suggest. This would appear also to open up WfL's central dynamic: the tensions between a woman's desire to be with her hlaford, and his command that she should be in sanctuary; and between her affection for him and her bitterness that she has been forced from him.

The speaker's character is drawn thoroughly and with sympathy. 'Ful oft wit beotedan / ðæt unce ne gedælde nemne deað ana- / owiht elles' ('Often indeed the two of us vowed / that nothing should part us except death alone / nothing else') is an image of impetuous young lovers – but the beot, to take 'eft is þæt onhworfen' with these lines as well as those following, had to change, since something other than death has separated them; and we have the disillusionment of age. Not only the character's longing, but her bitterness, is worked into the persona's voice; and indeed, it has a voice, distinct in the second stanza, in which the speaker uses both 21a and 23b polysemically as pivots between passages. We see a resilient mind, to which age's wider perspective on the world is emerging in the last stanza.

As for the reasons for this separation, 11-12 (the actions of 'paes monnes magas') and 25b-27 ('sceal ic feor ge neah / mines felaleofan fæhðu dreogan'; 'I must, far or near, / suffer the ?blood-feud of my much-beloved') are probably all the narrative we will have; but we also have hints in the mon's apparently flawed character. Bray's idea that 'The poets [of WfL and Canu Heledd] use the lamentation to foreground the
failure of martial, heroic ideals to those who are neither warriors nor chieftains' is useful; but in both cases, we might also have, and perhaps have more prominently, criticism of those who do not achieve those ideals: after all, 'beORN sceAL gebidan bonne he beOT spricēd' ('A man must bide his time when he speaks a vow'; The Wanderer line 70). It appears that the speaker's hlaford has, in heroic terms, failed her; though given that he is 'ful gemǣcne', she may not be without fault herself. He has, perhaps, failed in other ways too, and this conceivably provides a context for his fehðu. The closest we can come to understanding 9-10 may be to guess that the speaker attempted to follow when 'min hlaford gewat heonan of leodum', ('my lord departed, hence from the people(s)'), 'folgād secan' perhaps in wry allusion to violence unknown to us, or to her own exilic state, normally associated with lordless men. At some point in her endeavours, 'pæs monnes magas' attempted to prevent her; and he sent her into sanctuary. Focusing on the worse possibility for his existence, the speaker seems pessimistic about its outcome. She loves him very well — but also sees that he has brought his fate upon himself, and that she is sharing the consequences. The sympathy she might extend to him can only be tempered by the wracking experience she is enduring.

The situations of the speaker and her freond are, then, neither merely gloomy landscapes, nor purely pathetic fallacy: they involve distinct motifs, possibly including 'women's/lovers' lament' figures, describing environments with images not only of misery, but also, it seems, inversions of the paradisical — images of the hellish. We can read these images simply as traditional topoi; but might also view them from a Christian perspective, whereby the pagan associations of the speaker's environment intensify its terror. It seems likely enough that both readings could have been found among an Anglo-Saxon audience — even a wholly Christian audience. A more particular perspective on the Anglo-Saxon reading of WfL is also available in the poem's manuscript punctuation. Precisely in what ways the Exeter Book's pointings should be interpreted remains uncertain; but their evidence again offers us a chance to refine our understanding of the poem, if we can understand that evidence: the neglected voice of an Old English speaker, or speakers, can be brought to bear on long-standing questions of syntactic, formal, and therefore narrative division, to improve our understanding of WfL as a cultural and historical artefact, and, hopefully, as a poem.
NOTES


2 Emily Jensen, 'The Wife's Lament's Eordscraf: Literal or Figural Sign?', Neuphilologische Mitteilungen, 91 (1990), 449-57 (pp. 450-51).


8 Exeter Book quotations cited from The Exeter Anthology of Old English Poetry, ed. by Bernard J. Muir, 2 vols (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 1994), collated with Chambers. I include manuscript pointings, but not the markers which come at the end of poems. Translations from Old English and Latin are my own, and are intended only as a
guide to understanding the original text. However, where I discuss a word's semantics in the course of this piece, I merely include the original word(s) in any translations.

9 Page, p. 181.

10 *Dictionary of Old English*, ed. by A. C. Amos (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1986–), s.v. *denn*.


14 Battles, pp. 274-76.


20 The precise nature of this context is essentially unknown. Nicholas Jacobs has emphasised the suggestion that the form of intermixed prose and verse preserved in Irish provides a model to understand the Welsh 'saga englynion', and extended it to Old English poems such as *WfL*, supposing that the poetry which we have has been recorded without its
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prose frame ('Celtic Saga and the Contexts of Old English Elegiac Poetry', *Etudes Celtiques*, 26 (1989), 95-142). There is very little evidence of any Welsh influence on Old English literature, but such a form could have come via Irish ecclesiastics, or through Norse (cf. *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II*). However, while we have indisputable evidence for Old English verse-narratives, our only Old English prose narratives (e.g. saints' lives, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*) appear to derive from Latinate forms. The only possible exception which I know of is the 'Cynewulf and Cyneheard' 755 Chronicle entry, which, while in some ways impressive, does little to suggest a burgeoning Old English prose narrative style. We should perhaps suppose instead that had, say, the compiler of the Codex Regius organised the Exeter Book, we might have had a prose passage explaining *WfL*'s context.


23 Cf. Elizabeth Dearing Hanscom, 'The Feeling for Nature in Old English Poetry', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 5 (1903-05), 439-63 (p. 454); *Genesis B*, line 60a, which describes hell as *pa deopan dala*.


26 Amos, s.v. *beorg*.


'grove, wood', it is also attested as 'referring to a sacred grove', Amos, s.v. *bearu*. For a survey see Orton, p. 209.


33 Battles, p. 273.

34 See, for a survey and study, Karl P. Wentersdorf, 'The Situation of the Narrator in the Old English *Wife’s Lament*, *Speculum*, 56 (1981), 492-516.


36 Leslie, pp. 55-56; Battles, p. 274.


39 For example, much of Old English poetry is free translation from the Bible and its apocrypha, e.g. *Genesis, Exodus, Daniel, Andreas*, and much besides this draws on Christian-Latin material (e.g., in the Exeter Book, the three *Christ* poems, *The Pheonix, The Seafarer*).


44 The implications of this stanza are particularly interesting for *WfL*; see fn. 58 below.


46 For the former argument see Thomas M. Davis, 'Another View of *The Wife’s
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Lament’, Papers on English Language and Literature, 1 (1965), 291-305 (p. 302).

47 Bradley, p. 384; Kershaw, p. 33.


52 O'Keeffe, Visible Song, p. 153.

53 MS blæð.

54 Taking blipe gebær in line 21a with the description.


57 For an argument based on this lexical contrast, see Andy Orchard, 'Oral Tradition' in Reading Old English Texts, ed. by Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 101-23 (p. 121, n. 3). An interesting comparison may be drawn between my reading and stanza six of Helreið Brynhildar, whose first part I have already quoted. Its second half carries the same meaning in both MSS (cf. Flateyjarbók, ed. by Sigurður Nordal, 4 vols (Akranes: Flateyjarútgaðan, 1944-45), I (1944), p. 395); I quote the Codex Regius text here:

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Lét hamí vára
hugfullr konungr,
áta systra,
undir eic borit;
vær ec vestra tólf,
ef þic vita lystir,
er ec ungom gram
eiða selac.
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The wise king had our
magic garments –
eight sisters we were together –
put under an oak;
I was twelve years old,
if you want to know,
when I gave my promise
to the young prince.

27
Alaric Hall

Quite to what event Brynhildr alludes here is unknown: 'Should the "young prince" be construed as the king who carried off the hamir and should it be understood that he exacted a betrothal in exchange for their return? Or is the "young prince" Agnarr, whom, whom she presently supports in battle?' (Theodore M. Andersson, *The Legend of Brynhild*, Islandica, 42 (London: Cornell University Press, 1980), pp. 114-15). But a possible reading would be that, upon reaching the age of majority (12), she swore oaths to a 'young prince', and he subsequently sent her (or, in the CR text, her swan-cloak), under an oak-tree. *WfL*’s 'ic up weox' could imply much the same as *Helreið Brynhildar*’s 'var ec vetra tólf', and could also, reading δα as 'when' in line 18, mark her growing up as a significant step towards swearing her oaths of love. It seems possible, then, that the narrative behind Brynhildr’s allusion is essentially similar to that of *WfL*. As I have already noted, in Norse, it is supernatural women who tend to be set in locations such as we see in *WfL*, and if something similar held for the ancestors of the topos which we may perceive in *WfL*, then the association of the story of what appears to be a normal woman with that of a valkyrie need not occasion surprise.

58 Cf. *The Wanderer* lines 1-5.
59 Cf. note 55; Davis, p. 299.
60 Cf. Leslie, p. 53.
61 Mitchell, 1. §1399.
62 Jensen, p. 454.
63 Kershaw, p. 175.
64 Kathryn A. Lowe, ' "A Fine and Private Place": *The Wife’s Lament*, ll. 33-34, the Translators and the Critics', *Lastworda betst*: Essays in Memory of Christine E. Fell, ed. by Kathryn A. Lowe and Carole Hough (Donington: Shaun Tyas, 2002), pp. 122-43. My thanks go to Katie Lowe for showing me this article in advance of publication.
65 *ibid.*, p. 137.
66 Harris, p. 96.
68 Hamer, p. 73.
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e.g. Eleanor Lench, 'The Wife's Lament: a Poem of the Living Dead', Comitatus, 1 (1970), 3-23 (pp. 16-17, n. 37).


Fittingly enough, perhaps, for a poem immediately preceding, in its manuscript context, one on Doomsday, the start of a sequence dealing with 'aspects of the Easter liturgical season' (Muir, I, p. 26). It may also be noted in this connection that WfL can be seen to exhibit many features found in riddles, conceivably making its position in the Exeter Book between riddles 1-59 and Judgement Day I a deliberate pivot between sections of the anthology (cf. Faye Walker-Pelkey, 'Frige Hvæt ic Hatte: The Wife's Lament as Riddle', Papers on Language and Literature, 28 (1992), 242-66). A further point of interest, made to me by Andy Orchard, is that not only does the first line of WfL contain giedd, among whose meanings is 'riddle', but so does the last of Wulf and Eadwacer, the poem that precedes riddles 1-59: 'uncer giedd geador'.


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