

## The Quranic Tone of *The Wife's Lament*

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### Abstract

**Objectives:** Relying on the resemblance between the tone and theme of *The Wife's Lament* and their counterparts in the Quranic narrative of Virgin Mary's story, this paper aims at deciphering the devotional tone of *The Wife's Lament*, which is an Anglo-Saxon poem that is usually viewed by critics as a woman's monologue-like confession of her longing and suffering due to her husband's absence.

**Methods:** The paper reads the poem under discussion by comparing its melancholic diction and atmosphere to the diction and atmosphere of the Quranic narrative of Virgin Mary's story highlighting the sense of intertextuality between the Anglo-Saxon poem and the Quranic original of the story.

**Results:** Confirming that the woman's lamentation, in the poem under discussion, is caused by the absence of her male addressee; nevertheless, it shows that identifying such a male addressee is crucial to better understand the poem. We point out that the resemblance between *The Wife's Lament* and the Quranic narrative of Virgin Mary's lamentation caused by her giving birth to a child without being married to a man, implies that the poem's anonymous addressee in *The Wife's Lament* is likely to be God.

**Conclusion:** Against the conventional view that *The Wife's Lament* is better read in terms of a wife-husband reproach, this paper concludes that the poem is an allegorical piece that expresses the woman's fear of wasting much time without contacting God or dedicating herself to medieval monasticism. The poem is a riddle that imitates Mary's approach of communicating with God, thus promoting it as the ideal means of communication vulnerable Christians should adopt to contact their God without causing themselves any troubles or societal confrontations.

**Keywords:** Anglo-Saxon poetry, devotional poetry, English literature, The Wife's Lament, intertextuality.

### النبرة القرآنية في قصيدة "رثاء الزوجة"

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#### ملخص

الأهداف: بالاعتماد على التشابه بين نبرة وموضوع "رثاء الزوجة" ونظائرها في السرد القرآني لقصة مريم العذراء، يهدف هذا البحث إلى تحليل النغمة التعبيرية لقصيدة "رثاء الزوجة"، وهي مقطوعة أنجلوسكسونية اعتاد النقاد على قراءتها كاعتراف امرأة- بشكل المونولوج- بشوقها ومعاناتها بسبب غياب زوجها.

المنهجية: تعتمد الدراسة في تحليلها للقصيدة قيد النقاش على أسلوب المقارنة الأدبية، إذ تقارن أسلوب القصيدة وأجواءها السوداوية بأسلوب وأجواء السرد القرآني لقصة مريم العذراء. تقتبس الدراسة بعض أبيات القصيدة وتحلل مفرداتها وبعض تراكيها البلاغية مقارنة بما يوازنها في السرد القرآني بطريقة تبرز جوهر التناص بين القصيدة الأنجلوسكسونية والأصل القرآني للقصيدة.

النتائج: أظهرت النتائج أن عويل المرأة في القصيدة قيد البحث سببه غياب المخاطب المذكور، كما أظهرت أن تحديد كينونة المخاطب الغائب في القصيدة أمر بالغ الأهمية لفهم القصيدة بشكل أفضل. وعليه، فتؤكد الدراسة بأن التشابه بين قصيدة "رثاء الزوجة" والرواية القرآنية لحزن مريم العذراء -بسبب ولادتها طفلاً دون أن تكون متزوجة من رجل- يُرجح بأن المخاطب الغائب في قصيدة "رثاء الزوجة" هو الله.

الخلاصة: على عكس وجهة النظر التقليدية القائلة بأنه من الأفضل قراءة "رثاء الزوجة" في سياق العتاب بين الزوجة وزوجها، تخلص هذه الورقة إلى أن القصيدة قطعة مجازية تعبر عن خوف المرأة من إضاعة الكثير من الوقت دون التواصل مع الله أو تكريس نفسها للرهبنة في العصور الوسطى. وتؤكد الدراسة على أن القصيدة لغز يحاكي أسلوب مريم في التواصل مع الله، وبالتالي يروج لذلك الأسلوب باعتباره وسيلة الاتصال المثالية التي يجب على المسيحيين المستضعفين -في حينه- اعتمادها للاتصال بالله دون التسبب في أي مشاكل أو مواجهات مجتمعية.

الكلمات الدالة: شعر الأنجلوسكسون، الشعر التعبيري، الأدب الإنجليزي، "رثاء الزوجة"، التناص.



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## Introduction

The corpus of traditional criticism on *The Wife's Lament* shows that "the obscure Anglo-Saxon poem *The Wife's Lament* offers a number of intriguing problems to the critic" (Ward, 1960: 26) and that its "correct interpretation ... is one of the more [sic] hotly debated subjects in medieval studies" (Ramsay, 2011: 51). While J. A. Ward (1960), for instance, believes that "the emotional content and basic situation of the poem are quite clear. The poem, a monologue, records the lament of an exiled wife" (p. 26), the several editorial notes of Frederic J. Cassidy and Richard Ringer's third edition of the poem (1971) indicate that the text is "disconcerting", "ambiguous", "strange", and hard to understand. To mitigate this debate, John D. Niles (2003) deploys philology and historical anthropology to scrutinize the poem's "difficult, enigmatic, [and] grammatically ambiguous features" (p. 1107). He deciphers the speaker's identity, word meanings, and the phenomenon of "cursing" found in the poem emphasizing that the poem is "an imagined *cri de coeur* that wells up from the depths of loneliness and pain and finds an eventual expression in a curse directed against the speaker's estranged husband" (p. 1150). This finding concurs with "most commentators in seeing no need to posit an allegorical meaning for the poem" (p. 1110), which does not uncover the poem's gnomic nature. Niles concludes that "The Wife's voice may or may not be regarded as exemplary, but it demands to be heard" (p. 1150). Likewise, Eleanor Parker (2020) contends that "even without knowing the story, what does come across, strongly and unmistakably, is the speaker's emotional state: the intensity of her grief, longing, desire, and loneliness" (para. 7). Parker does not decode the puzzling context of the poem; she rather highlights the poem's melancholic tone and atmosphere, thus proliferating the poem's vagueness and lack of surety.

To resolve this problematic situation, this paper suggests that the vagueness of the poem under discussion stems from its non-Christian intertextuality: its borrowing of the tone and mood of the Quranic narrative of Virgin Mary's lamentation while giving birth to a child, namely Jesus, without being married to a man. The contexts and cultures of both narratives are different, but their resemblance at the level of tone, approach, and theme is prominent. Thus, we argue that the woman's anonymous male addressee in *The Wife's Lament* is God and that her lamentation is caused by being ambivalent regarding how to handle her society's slandering perception of her loneliness. This viewpoint proposes that *The Wife's Lament* is more *devotional* than heroic, as the poem integrates suffering, melancholy, fear, hope, sympathy, and optimism, a set of elements that constitutes the main scaffold of devotional confessions that usually express "the evocation of an emotional and personal response to theological truths" (Foster et al., 2018: 1). The poem is read here as a melancholic monologue-based confession that coalesces asceticism and mysticism to establish a link between the female speaker and God, an approach that contextualizes the poem within the corpus of "biblical and hagiographic verse, prose translations of Scripture and the abundant sermons and homilies [found in Anglo-Saxon literature]" (Jones, 2012: 427). We conclude that *The Wife's Lament* is a proto-ceremonial piece that contemplates the speaker's journey from secularism to Christianity in heroic terms, a journey where many cross-roads bring about the voyager's inner ambivalent feelings.

## Discussion

*The Wife's Lament* reports the story of a woman who is depicted while lamenting her life conditions away from her absent master. She is commanded by that master to live in a very remote place alone, without friends or family; consequently, she suffers several hardships and calamities at the individual and societal level. The scenes and actions of the poem flow without introducing or establishing any specific cultural or regional referents, as if the narrative does not belong to any particular culture or region. The female speaker emphasizes her exile, isolation, loneliness, fear, and suffering. She then contemplates the times of glory and happiness she enjoyed besides her "hlāford". After that, she points to some minor actions that ensue her hardships attributing, at least partially, her sadness and misery to the absence of her "hlāford". Following this, she compares herself to happy lovers, contemplating the mental and emotional state of her "hlāford" and confirming that he should be eager to rejoin her. Finally, she concludes the entire speech in a very exemplary statement: "Wā bið þām þe sceal of langoþe lēofes ābīdan" (ll.52-53).<sup>1</sup> Different from this clear closure, the rest of the poem (ll.1-51) apparently lacks clarity and cohesion: several affirmative, interrogative, rhetorical, declarative, informative, and

<sup>1</sup> This line is translated by Liuzza (2002) into "Woe to the one who must suffer longing for a loved one".

exclamatory statements are mixed together to address an absent or *invisible*, unnamed male figure who seems to be responsible for the woman's hardships. This mixing sanctions the use of rhetorical devices that allow for words to be double entendre and for the message to be polysemous. In fact, it is hard to tell whether the female speaker is talking to or about a friend, husband, tribal chieftain, landlord, or country leader. It is never definite whether she is talking about friendship, husband-wife relationship, courtly love, or sensual love. Also, it is not clear whether the main purpose of the speaker is to curse the male figure responsible for her malady (Ward, 1960: 32) or to sympathize with that figure for his own potential hardships (Straus, 1981: 278). For Nile (2003), the woman is cursing a male figure for causing her much misery (p. 1120-1135). For Brookbanks (2008-2009), the poem emphasizes "the speaker's ability to verbally express her sorrow with her husband's internal torment" (p. 29). Overall, the only viewpoint approved so far by critics is that the speaker is a female who suffers emotional disequilibrium due to the absence of a certain male figure,<sup>2</sup> a consensus that does not resolve the imprecision of the poem's theme.

To handle this imprecision, the poem is better read as a composition of two main parts: the first part (ll.1-41) contemplates the female speaker's hardships (their causes, manifestations, and disastrous consequences); the second part (ll.42-53) conjectures the absent lover's mental and emotional confusion.<sup>3</sup> In the first part, the speaker expresses her emotional and mental state deploying several agony-loaded words like "ġeōmorre" (sorrowful/sad), "yrmþa" (miseries), "wonn" (wound), "wræcsīþa" (exile), "ġewāt" (departed), "ūhtċeare" (sorrow/worry), "winelēas" (friendless), "wræcċa" (wretch), "wēapearfe" (woeful need), "ġewīdost" (wondering up), "tōdælden" (separated), longade (longing), "ġepōht" (thoughtful), "dyrne" (hidden), "lēofra lýt" (little love/number of lovers), "ġeōmor" (sad), "heardsaēlīgne" (unfortunate), "hyġeġeōmorne" (mourning), "mōd mīpendne" (obscuring mind), "morþor hycgendne" (murderous mind), "fæhðe" (feud), "oflongad" (longing), "wynna lēas" (without joy), "wēpan" (weep), "wræcsīþas" (exile), "earfoþa" (troubles), "mōdċeare" (anxious), and "longaþes" (longing). In the second part, she desires that her absent male addressee has/be "ġeōmormōd" (sad minded), "heard heortan ġepōht" (hard heart thoughts), "brēostċeare" (anxiety), "sinsorgna" (crowds of sorrows), "fāh" (outlawed), "wēriġmōd" (disquiet minded), "drēorsele" (dreary hall), "Wā" (woe), and "langope" (longing).

These words and phrases reflect the speaker's psychological suffering and mental bewilderment resulting from being involved in a situation with no resolution. The female speaker does not have the power to restore her absent male, she does not have the status or social position to live without him, and she cannot change the society's slandering perception of her loneliness. She talks to herself because she does not have any other option: she is alone and has nobody to communicate with, which increases her sense of exile and loneliness. The woman introduces her lament saying: "Ic þis ġiedd wrece bi mē ful ġeōmorre, / mīnre sylfre sīð" (1-2);<sup>4</sup> she then confirms, "ic on ūhtan āna gonge / under āctreō ġeond þās eorðscrafu. / Þær ic sittan mōt sumorlangne dæg; / þær ic wēpan mæg mīne wræcsīþas" (35-38).<sup>5</sup> Such devastating melancholy is caused, according to the female speaker, by an absent male figure who is not named throughout the poem. It seems that the woman is not concerned with revealing the real name of her "hlāford" for a reason or another: probably, he is so inferior to the extent that nobody would care to know, or he is so superior to the extent that he is known to everybody. Either way, we believe that such anonymity provokes several interpretations among which outstands the hypothesis that naming the addressee potentially estranges the situation or undermines the plausibility of the narrative. Is it possible that the lamenting woman is talking directly to God? If yes, then it is her awareness of the society's disbelief in God or disbelief in her ability to directly talk to God that avoids her from naming Him!

Inspired by the resemblance between the lamenting woman's diction and tone, on the one hand, and those of Virgin Mary when giving birth to Jesus Christ without being married to a man, on the other, we believe that the male addressee in

<sup>2</sup> For a comprehensive analysis of the female gender of the speaker in *The Wife's Lament*, see Jane Chance, *Woman as Hero in Old English Literature* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1986), pp. 127-28; Patricia Belanoff, "Women's Songs, Women's Language: 'Wulf and Eadwacer' and 'The Wife's Lament'" in *New Readings on Women in Old English Poetry*, ed. Helen Damico and Alexandra Hennessey Olsen (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 193-203; and Marilyn Desmond, "The Voice of Exile: Feminist Literary History and the Anonymous Anglo-Saxon Elegy," *Critical Inquiry* 16 (1990):572-590.

<sup>3</sup> For Nile (2003), this part expresses the female speaker's curse of the distant lover (p. 1120-1150).

<sup>4</sup> "I make this song of myself, deeply sorrowing, / My own life's journey" (Liuzza, 2002)

<sup>5</sup> "I walk alone in the light of dawn / Under the oak-tree and through this earth-cave, / Where I must sit and summer-long day; / There I can weep for all my exiles" (Liuzza, 2002).

*The Wife's Lament* is God. Chapter 19 of *Holy Quran* called "*Maryam*" (Mary) reads thus: "And mention in the Scripture Mary, when she withdrew from her family to an eastern location (16). She secluded herself from them, and We sent to her Our Spirit, and he appeared to her as an immaculate human (17) [...] So she conceived him and withdrew with him to a remote place (22). The labor-pains drove her to the trunk of the palm-tree. She said, 'I wish I had died before this, and been completely forgotten' (23)".<sup>6</sup> The excerpt, though laconic, communicates a number of leitmotifs that should be pulled together to create a life-like scenario that is believed to have happened at some point in time at one specific place. These leitmotifs include: an exiled female speaker's melancholic confession, a helpless woman seeking refuge in a transcendent power, a crying woman expressing self-denial and regretting a past state, and a devoted woman seeking the help of the Lord through the agency of the Holy Spirit. These leitmotifs constitute the scaffold of *The Wife's Lament* where the lamenting woman is exiled and left alone to regret her past state. She is not giving birth to a child miraculously, but set in a situation where appropriating Mary's approach of outlasting hardships by talking in privacy seems to be her optimal choice.

What supports this view is the diction of the Quranic account of Mary's story, which resembles that of *The Wife's Lament*. The Quranic Chapter, similar to the Anglo-Saxon poem, is full of agony-loaded words and expressions that denote and connote simultaneous happiness and misery, joy and fear, love and hesitancy: "Fahamalathu" (wretch), "fantabazat" (departed), "makaan qasiyyaa" (separated place), "Fa'ajaa'ah" (worry), "almakhaadu" (troubles; wound), "yaa laitane mittu" (sorrowful/sad; longing; woeful need; mourning), "nasyam mansiyyaa" (wondering up; unfortunate), etc. Whereas at one place, Mary entertains the joy of carrying the God-given baby in her body, she suffers agonies of guilt over what has happened at another. In response to God's holy messenger saying: "I am only a messenger from your Lord, sent to bless you with a pure son" (19:19), Mary cries: "Alas! I wish I had died before this, and was a thing long forgotten" (19:23).<sup>7</sup> The dialogue obviously shows that Mary is perplexed: she is happy to have the God-given child; simultaneously, she is afraid of being slandered by her own people for delivering a baby without being married. Thus, she is communicating her fears and sense of estrangement directly to God or His messenger who functions in the Quranic narrative as the omniscient narrator, a voice that knows almost everything.

*The Wife's Lament* does not have the advantage of being narrated by God or His messenger; eventually, the lamenting woman refers to her male addressee using the epithet "hlaford". This epithet, which is a singular masculine common noun that appears in the poem twice without having a clear referent, is central to our argument. In "The Situation of the Narrator's Lord in *The Wife's Lament*", Karl P. Wentersdorf (1970) reads "hlaford" as "the lord", be it a husband or lover, who is associated with the female speaker through "friendship or love" (p. 604). In her book *The Old English Elegies: A Critical Edition and Genre Study*, Anne L. Klinck (2001) notes that the epithet "hlaford" is widely used in Old English poems, including *The Wife's Lament*, to denote "husband" or "liege lord" (p. 178). Likewise, Nile (2003) confirms that it is natural that "hlaford" means "husband", as "the man in question is indeed the speaker's husband, and not a more casual friend or lover" (p. 1110). In the second note on his own translation of *The Wife's Lament*, Christian Beck (2017) states that "hlaford" means "lord", "liege-lord", and/or "husband". These different interpretations of "hlaford" focus on the emotional relationship (i.e. friendship or marriage) embedded in the speaker's passionate words; yet they all ignore the fact that "hlaford" may refer to God or His messenger.

Considering that Jesus is conventionally viewed in Christianity as the guardian of bread or the bread of life (Book of John 6:25-59), the Quranic image of God as a food caterer or provider supports our belief that the epithet "hlaford" in *The Wife's Lament* points to God. The Quranic account of Mary's story runs thus:

So a voice reassured her from below her, 'Do not grieve! Your Lord has provided a stream at your feet (19:24). And shake the trunk of this palm tree towards you, it will drop fresh, ripe dates upon you (19:25). So eat and drink, and put your

<sup>6</sup> "Wazkur fil Kitaabi Maryama; izin tabazat min ahlihaa makaanan sharqiyyaa (16). Fattakhazat min doonihim hijaab fa arsalnaaa ilaihaa roohanaa fatamassala lahaa basharan sawiyyaa (17). [...] Fahamalathu fantabazat bihee makaanan qasiyyaa (22). Fa ajaaa 'ahal makhaadu ilaa jiz'in nakhlati qaalat yaa laitane mittu qabla haazaa wa kuntu nasyam mansiyyaa (23)". The transliteration of the Quranic verses used throughout the paper is quoted from *Quran 411* <https://quran411.com/surah-imran> For the English translation of the Quranic verses here and throughout the paper, it is quoted from *Quran.com* <https://quran.com/19?startingVerse=22>

<sup>7</sup> "Qaala innamaa ana rasoolu Rabbiki li ahaba laki ghulaaman zakiyyaa" (19:19). "yaa laitane mittu qabla haazaa wa kuntu nasyam mansiyyaa" (19:23).

heart at ease [...] (19:26).<sup>8</sup>

The excerpt emphasizes the image of God as the One who is able to provide Mary with food. He is the food giver or guardian who directs Mary to a palm tree to get “fresh, ripe dates” advising her to “eat and drink” without having any worries. He is the “hlaford”, the “imagined” power, that a helpless victim resorts to in abandoned places. A similar image of God as a food giver is highlighted in another Quranic verse related to Mary’s story: “Whenever Zachariah visited her [Mary] in the sanctuary, he found her supplied with provisions. He exclaimed, ‘O Mary! Where did this come from?’ She replied, ‘It is from Allah. Surely Allah provides for whoever He wills without limit’” (3:37).<sup>9</sup> In this Quranic excerpt, the food caterer (provider or guardian) of Mary is God, the heavenly supplier, the holy spirit, which is likely to be referred to in the Arabic text as “hlaford”– (loaf + ward). Accordingly, it is feasible to read “hlaford” in *The Wife’s Lament* as the Old English epithet of God, considering that “the Latin words for God are glossed by Old English *dryhten* and *hlaford*, both meaning ‘lord’” (Hough and Corbett, 2007: 5) and that “Old English *hlaford* is a contraction of earlier *hlafeard*, literally ‘one who guards the loaves,’ from *hlafe* ‘bread, loaf’” (*Online Etymology Dictionary*).

This implies that the woman’s melancholic declaration of her suffering in the first four lines of *The Wife’s Lament* reflects the ambivalent feelings she has had due to being distant from God, a state caused by “the opposition of tradition and embedded culture [which] can be seen as the chief bulwarks against the triumph of the Cross” (Chaney, 1960: 198). The woman seems to be a new convert who does not have the power to declare her new faith while realizing that “Confessing correct belief qualified a Christian for meriting eternal life after death as well as for receiving sacramental grace, through which a Christian is sanctified and united with Christ on earth” (Wilcox, 2014: 308). The woman is torn between the static nature of the Anglo-Saxon heathen heritage and the fundamentality of *riht geleafa* for salvation. She cannot talk in public, and she cannot stay silent. Consequently, she decides to perform the confession of her Christian faith in privacy. This scenario resembles Virgin Mary’s situation depicted in the Quranic chapter where Mary is either in “*almihraab*” (an enclosed place for praying) or “*makaan qasiyyaa*” (an exiled place) to contemplate her religious orientation and practice spiritual communication with God in privacy. Both women reveal their feelings and spiritual concerns away from other people, which seems to be not their own choice. They are directed not to make any verbal and/or nonverbal communication with people around them. We read in the poem: “Hēt mec hlāford mīn herheard niman/ Āhte ic lēofra lýt on þissum londstede/ holdra frēonda” (15-17).<sup>10</sup> In *Quran*, the verse reads like this: “But if you see any of the people, say, ‘I have vowed silence to the Most Compassionate, so I am not talking to anyone today’” (19:26).<sup>11</sup> The woman in *The Wife’s Lament* is commanded by her Lord to be alone and not to engage with other people; Mary is commanded by God to be silent and never talk to others.

### Conclusion

Read in light of the Quranic narrative of Virgin Mary’s experience while giving birth to Jesus without being married to a man, *The Wife’s Lament* can be read as a devotional narrative that reports a woman’s melancholic attempt to maintain her existence and religiosity in a very conservative, pagan society. The poem exposes the clash between paganism and religiosity as experienced by several individuals, especially Anglo-Saxon converts to Christianity who lack the power and social status to declare their Christian belief in public, which causes them to adopt Mary’s approach of communicating with God in privacy and declaring their belief before Him. This viewpoint complies with the view that devotional confessions have been dominant during “the late Anglo-Saxon period” (Lees, 2008: 236), and elegies “appear at times to be situated between the erotic and the Christian world, between the values of the Germanic hall and the virtues of asceticism and spiritual renunciation” (Liuzza, 2002: xxix). Thus, the poem shows how Anglo-Saxon “devotional activities” have always functioned “as a means of direct interaction with God” (Harkaway-Krieger, 2018: 29), which resembles Mary’s direct

<sup>8</sup> “Fanaadaahaa min tahtihaa allaa tahzanee qad ja’ala Rabbuki tahtaki sariyyaa (19:24). Wa huzzeee ilaiki bijiz ‘in nakhlati tusaagit ‘alaiki rutaban janiyyaa (19:25). Fakulee washraabee wa qarree ‘ainaa [...]” (19:26).

<sup>9</sup> “kullamaa dakhala ‘alaihaa Zakariyyal Mihraaba wajada ‘indahaa rizqan qaala yaa Maryamu annaa laki haazaa qaalat huwa min ‘indil laahi innal laaha yazuqu mai yashaa’u bighairi hisaab” (3:37).

<sup>10</sup> “My lord commanded me to live with him here / I had few loved ones or loyal friends / in this country”.

<sup>11</sup> “fa immaa tarayinna minal bashari ahadan faqoolee innee nazartu lir Rahmaani sawman falan ukallimal yawma insiyyaa” (19:26).

interaction with God reported in *Holy Quran*. It is true that the diction of the Anglo-Saxon poem under discussion potentially alludes to a husband-wife relationship, but it is noteworthy that such a relationship has always been deployed in the medieval era to allegorize the relationship between the Church and Christ, between female Christians and God. This piece of evidence explains why the poem is set in the Exeter Book after other literary riddles (Walker-Pelkey, 1992): it seems that the poem is a riddle that depicts Mary's approach of communicating with God as the ideal means of communication vulnerable Christians should adopt to contact their God without causing themselves any troubles or societal confrontations. In short, *The Wife's Lament* does not necessarily attribute the woman's sadness to her loss of a heroic past or social status, but to her fear of wasting much time without contacting God or dedicating herself to medieval monasticism.

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