

Lamenting or complaining?: female authority in the wife's lament



In Book II of *Troilus and Criseyde*, the character Pandarus states: “ Wommen are born to thraldom and penance, /and to been under mannes governance.”(Chaucer, line 286-7) Extracted from an exchange between the maiden Criseyde and her uncle, Pandarus, the passage speaks volumes on contemporary views on romance, and the ways in which those views were influenced by prevalent attitudes towards women. The highly ambiguous Germanic poem *The Wife’s Lament*, though it precedes Chaucer considerably, documents the position of a subjugated woman that experiences exile from her husband, his kin, and her own kin. In consultation with Elaine M. Treharne’s publication, *Writing Gender and Genre in Medieval Literature: Approaches to Old and Middle English Texts*, the poem breaks convention with traditional literary representations of female figures. Treharne establishes a framework for “ feminine romance” in Middle English poetry, a form of aesthetic expression that favored masculine heroes and chivalric concepts of male identity. A woman, however, dictates *The Wife’s Lament*, and advocates for divorced or abandoned women a message of grief and suffering; this language is regarded by scholarship as the conveyance of “ lamenting”. In Carol Parrish Jamison’s article, “ Traffic of Women in Germanic Literature: The Role of the Peace Pledge in Marital Exchanges”, she provides historical context for the wife’s unfortunate position, that of a marital commodity in political exchanges. By considering Jamison’s argument, the female speaker’s voice can be isolated from her physical situation—which is barely divulged in the poem—and a focus placed on her grieving language may propose a dissatisfaction in its title. Perhaps a more appropriate title for the poem is “ *The Wife’s Complaint*”, since in the beginning lines she proclaims it her mission to speak for herself and her own

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sorrows, and in the concluding lines curses her male counterpart for his neglect. By interpreting the speaker's "lament" as "complaint", the position of the subjugated female changes; the poem instead encourages a feminist reading that accommodates the precedence of female speech and writing. Primarily, *The Wife's Lament* is understood as a *frauenlied*, more literally a "woman's song". The content describes an unnamed protagonist's isolation and victimization as a result of an exogamous relationship, a typical situation in the Anglo-Saxon heroic tradition. Interestingly, the "hero" is absent which problematizes the genre of the poem, and consequently, a concrete interpretation of femininity. David Salter, whose essay, "'Born to Thralldom and Penance': Wives and Mothers in Middle English Romance" occurs in Treharne's compilation, demonstrates the various gendered readings of early Middle English verse and the patriarchal endorsement that pervaded these texts. Salter makes a claim for the opposing female position in texts like *The Wife's Lament*: "...if we accept that romance is indeed a feminine genre, we are nonetheless presented with something of a paradox, for what seems to confront us when we examine romance is a feminine genre with virtually no female heroines." (Salter, 42) Salter's argument, though valid, is not compatible with *The Wife's Lament*, since the "heroine" is both speaker and protagonist of the poem; her voice, then, can be regarded as a universal, all encompassing articulation for the repressed woman. Salter continues: "While to a great extent Middle English romance does tend to marginalize female experience, it nonetheless acknowledges the centrality of women in moulding and developing the identity of the male hero." (Salter, 43) In accordance with this statement, a role reversal is evident in the poem; the speaker, through her husband's detrimental actions and the absence of his

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voice, is “ moulded” into the dominant character. The speaker’s vocalization functions as an outlier in the romance genre, it is inherently “ anti-romantic” since the female’s experience is not marginalized. Salter also makes comment on the roles of female figures in poetry: “ And it is particularly through their roles as wives and mothers that women in romance are able to accomplish this shaping of male identity.”(Salter, 43) As the title suggests, the speaker’s role was that of a wife, however, over the course of the poem that label becomes unsatisfactory. In terms of the romance genre, *The Wife’s Lament* is deemed unconventional due to a lack of masculine presence, the prevalence of the female voice, and the absence of a plot that circulates around the “ hero”. Now that the poem has been contextualized as atypical to the Middle English romance genre, it is possible to conceive of the speaker’s message as protest, rather than that of sorrow or regret. In considering the opening lines, the poem begins with a declaration: “ I make this song of myself, deeply sorrowing, my own life’s journey. I am able to tell all the hardships I’ve suffered since I grew up, but new or old, never worse than now –ever I suffer the torment of my exile.”(Mitchell, lines 1-5)The speaker, though concerned with grievous feelings, adopts an assertive tone when she announces the poem as “ her song”. She is “ able to tell all the hardships” for herself, and does not require a masculine filter to relay her story. It is essentially “ her own life’s journey”, and by establishing these oppressed circumstances and vocalizing her victimization, perhaps the poem or ‘ song’ is a mechanism for liberation. Jamison’s article is helpful in regards to the speaker’s situation and the reason for her exile:“ In order to bind men together and ensure peace, Germanic women of the highest rank sometimes served as peace pledges. Usually the daughter of an important warrior or

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king, the peace pledge would be married off to a man of high status who might be perceived as a potential threat to her kin in hopes of forming an alliance, or at least preventing conflict.”(Jamison, 14)It is likely that the situation Jamison postulates plagues the speaker, as she suffers in exile, isolated from her husband and family. The concept of arranged marriage was potentially oppressive to women, as they became the necessary component in political exchanges; the speaker is aware of her confinement, and perhaps her song will allow her to overcome female inferiority. Jamison also considers the topic of human exchange:“...in a society that valued warfare, marrying off women as a means to ensure peace could turn out badly, in such cases emphasizing the woman’s unfortunate plight as object of male exchange.”(Jamison, 15)The wife, in Jamison’s terms, is degraded to a commodity that satisfies both parties in a political trade. The speaker is conscious of her role as ‘ commodity’ and in the act of speaking she provides a feminine account of victimization; this influences her narrative as one impeded by anguish, yet propelled by injustice and a want for freedom. In examining the narrative, it is significant to consider that the author of The Wife’s Lament was probably male. By reminding ourselves of this, it does not hinder the poem’s attitude and speculations on female oppression. Jamison ultimately makes the connection between the speaker’s status and the historical context that was outlined previously:“ The narrator of The Wife’s Lament seems to be a peace pledge whose husband has left his homeland, perhaps exiled for some undisclosed crime, or perhaps to lead his men in battle.”(Jamison, 16)Jamison’s argument is compatible with the sorrow and longing that pervades her narrative: “ First my lord left his people/for the tumbling waves; I worried at dawn/where on earth my leader of men might

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be.”(Mitchell, lines 6-8) The speaker’s main concern here is the location of her husband, but, when she references him as the “ leader of men”, perhaps this signals a refusal to his leadership over her or women in general. The speaker does not seem distressed over her husband’s return; rather, the poem is saturated in grievous language and neglects to expose any desire to recover the marital bond. Jamison comments on the purpose of the poem and characterizes it as a response to the process of marital exchange:“ Early Germanic women had, in fact, a number of possible responses to marital exchanges and could find ways to move well beyond the role of object, asserting their influence as mothers and diplomats by king-making, or king-breaking, in their new husbands’ homes.”(Jamison, 31)To regard The Wife’s Lament as a response to demeaning exchanges and as a means to “ move beyond the role of object,” significantly changes the connotation of the lamenting language used to convey it; instead, it would be more appropriate to connote the language as that of ‘ complaint’. The speaker is not aggressive in adopting a role as a ‘ diplomat’, however, it is evident that she is in favor of her husband bearing a burden identical to her own. In respect to the contents of the narrative, it is equally important, if not more necessary to understand the function of female speech in general. By speaking, the wife is undertaking an action that was rarely allowed to women; the act of writing a ‘ song’ of her experience further enables the female figure to independence in political unions. Barrie Ruth Straus in her essay, “ Women’s Words as Weapons: Speech as Action in “ The Wife’s Lament””, interprets the poem as a form of speech-act. She asserts at the beginning:” The concept of the illocutionary act is introduced to make precise the way that the same proposition can be used differently—to make an assertion, to ask a question,

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to give an order, to express a wish, and so forth—depending on the situation.”(Straus, 269)Straus’s adoption of the “ illocutionary act” in determining purpose and meaning in the poem elevates the precedence of female language in Anglo-Saxon culture. By apply this concept to the narrative, it becomes apparent that the speaker’s intention advances beyond that of expressing mere sadness. Straus’s argument can be characterized by the following passage:“ The way the wife tells her story—that is, the way she uses words—reveals that she does not merely passively accept her fate, but rather takes advantage of a form of action available to women of her time.”(Straus, 270)Straus places countenance in the form over the content of the poem. She is conscious that the speaker’s intentions are precisely that, ‘ speaking out’, and promoting an empowering message for women through her unfortunate demise. In returning to the beginning lines of the poem, Straus’s proposal is also relevant:“ The presence of a marked overt performative at the beginning of “ The Wife’s Lament,” then, indicates the speaker’s attempt to make her listeners understand her deliberate act of making an assertion.”(Straus, 272)However, the bulk of the speaker’s frustration and desire for independence occurs in the concluding lines:“ Let to himselfall his worldly joys belong! let him be outlawedin a far distant land...My beloved will sufferthe cares of a sorrowful mind; he will rememberto often a happier home. Woe to the onewho must suffer longing for a loved one.”(Mitchell, lines 45-7, 50-53)The speaker becomes more aggressive in these last lines than anywhere else in the poem, which can be effectively interpreted as protest. The wife’s initial longing transitions into a longing for her husband’s exile, which translates to the wife’s inclination for equal treatment. Her narrative does not blatantly ask for liberation; instead,

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the speaker wishes for equal sorrow on her husband, which, in terms of speech acting, infuses the female voice with authority. Straus concludes her exposition by stating: “ The speaker has shown that she can do more than weep. She can still use words to make her story and its causes known. Thus she takes action by not suffering in silence.”(Straus, 275)The Wife’s Lament, though ambiguous in purpose and intention, enacts a performance of the oppression that women experience in marital exchanges and political strife. Anglo-Saxon literature and culture was fundamentally supported by the patriarchy and masculine topics, even those that are inherently female, such as feminine romance. The poem examined functions as more than a sorrowful lyric or an elegy for longing; the ambiguity that overwhelms the poem and confuses critics even in contemporary scholarship, was conceivably a universal message for women. The ambiguity allows for multiple interpretations and the possibility for a title that better articulates the want for independence associated with feminine romance. Perhaps a more appropriate title for the poem is “ The Wife’s Complaint”, since in the beginning lines she proclaims it her mission to speak for herself and her own sorrows, and in the concluding lines curses her male counterpart for his neglect. By interpreting the speaker’s “ lament” as “ complaint”, the position of the subjugated female changes; the poem instead encourages a feminist reading that accommodates the precedence of female speech and writing.

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