

The Old English “Husband’s Message”: Is It an ‘Elegy’? Is the One Sending the Message a ‘Husband’? Is the Addressee His ‘Wife’?*

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The title that scholars have assigned to a poem or a poetic fragment on the basis of its apparent overall content can often mislead the readers by confining their reception of the work within the scope of interpretation implied by it. There is no absolute guarantee that the title scholars have assigned to a poem or a poetic fragment is one that accurately captures its real substance. As a matter of fact, it involves much risk to confine or define the implication of a literary piece by assigning a title on the basis of its apparent content—‘apparent’ only on its surface level.

There is an Old English poetic fragment often referred to as “The Husband’s Message.” Its extant manuscript is in such a state of ruin that, despite the legibility of some words, its opening lines do not provide any

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clue to the poetic situation of the fragment. It is only with the off-verse of the fifth line, as lineated in accordance with Anglo-Saxon prosody, that the lines begin to make any sense:

Ful oft ic on bates
 [.] gesohte
 þær mec mondryhten min [.]
 ofer heah hofu; eom nu her cumen
 on ceolþele, ond nu cunnan scealt
 hu þu ymb modlufan mines frean
 on hyge hycge. Ic gehatan dear
 þæt þu þær tîrfæste treowe findest. (5b-12)¹

[Full often in the bosom
 Of a boat I . . . sought,
 Where my liege lord . . . me
 Over the high seas; I have now come here
 In a ship, and now you shall know
 How concerning the heart's love of my lord
 You should think in your mind. I dare promise
 That you will there find glorious fidelity.] (5b-12; my translation)

As we read these lines, what is clear is that the speaker in this fragment is not the 'husband' himself. The speaker is reporting to the addressee in an epistle what a warm welcome he has received from his lord, with whom he is now reunited, after making a journey over the waves. He is writing from where he is now, away from his and his lord's old homestead, where the intended recipient of the epistle still resides. In the ensuing lines the speaker encourages the person who will read the letter to make a journey to where the speaker is now—by guaranteeing that the addressee will also receive a warm welcome from his lord. The 'message' constitutes the major bulk of the

¹ All subsequent quotations from the poem are from Krapp and Dobbie 225-27.

poem, or the rest of the fragment. The ensuing thirteen lines read:

Hwæt, þec þonne biddan het se þisne beam agrof
 þæt þu sinchroden sylf gemunde
 on gewitlocan wordbeotunga,
 þe git on ærdagum oft gespræcon,
 þenden git moston on meoduburgum
 eard weardigan, an lond bugan,
 freondscype fremman. Hine fæhþo adraf
 of sigeþeode; heht nu sylfa þe
 lustum læran, þæt þu lagu drefde,
 siþþan þu gehyrde on hliþes oran
 galan geomorne geac on bearwe.
 Ne læt þu þec siþþan siþes getwæfan,
 lade gelettan lifgendne monn. (13-25)

[Look, he, who carved this wood, then ordered me
 To implore you, richly adorned, to bring back
 The memory of the plights and promises to your mind,
 That you two agreed upon in olden days,
 While you two could in the mead cities
 Occupy an abode, inhabit the same estate,
 And openly show your mutual love. A feud drove him away
 From his powerful kinsfolk. He himself has ordered me now
 To persuade you that you joyfully should stir the sea,
 When you have heard from the hillside's edge
 The sad cuckoo-bird sing in the grove.
 Then allow not any living man to turn you
 Away from the journey, or hinder the course.] (13-25; my translation)

One question arises at this point. What a strange way of asking one's wife to come to him—by resorting to the help of an intermediary, who writes down his message for her perusal? Why doesn't the lord personally write to his wife? Why does he need an intermediary? Even if we assume

that the speaker has been assigned the mission of sending a message from his lord to his wife, assuring her of a warm welcome, we cannot but suspect the presence of a political concern that keeps the lord from writing to her directly. In the first line quoted above (line 13), we encounter an attention-calling phrase: “he, who carved this wood” (“se þisne beam agrof”). A husband carving on a piece of wood a few letters—runic at that, as they turn out later—that he and his wife, only they, can understand the hidden implication thereof? What a strange way of sending a message to one’s wife? Moreover, the lord (or the husband) has ordered the speaker of the lines to implore the addressee to “bring back the memory of the plights and promises to [her] mind. . . .” Why did the unidentified man—whether he is the addressee’s husband or not—have to count on a message-writer for persuading the intended addressee to make a journey for reunion with him? Our personal experience is proof enough that, when a man wishes to implore his faraway beloved to embrace all the hardship involved in attaining reunion with him, he will tell her in *his* own voice—not through an intermediary’s! What does all this mean? I suspect that the poem, though in fragment, smacks of a political implication, rather than being a simple message from a loving husband to his wife, urging her to come and join him in sharing a happy life together again.

Scholars have tried to find a link between two Old English fragments—“The Wife’s Lament” and “The Husband’s Message”—as a mutually corresponding pair of poems, by reading the former as the complaint of a woman alienated from her husband and suffering from the pain of rejection, and the latter as the consolatory words sent from a man to his wife, asking her to make a journey to where he is now in prosperity for a happy reunion. I find it hard to agree with this view. In an essay published years ago, I tried to prove that the speaker of the poem, commonly entitled “The Wife’s Lament,” is not a woman, but a young retainer that has been alienated from, or ostracized by, the company of the

lord that he has served (Lee). I argued that the ostensibly female voice in the poem is a metaphor of a young retainer's lament over being an outcast, rather than literally the lament of a woman in dejection.

Now I wish to suggest that the fragment, commonly referred to as "The Husband's Message," may have been wrongfully denominated so. To rush to my conclusion, the fragment could be given a different title, say, "The Refugee Thane's Call of His Beloved Retainer." The voice heard throughout the work is that of a retainer, who has found out, after making a journey to rejoin his lord living in exile, that his lord, who had to leave his clansmen behind on an urgent occasion for some reasons 'political' in nature—"A feud drove him away / from his powerful kinsfolk" (19b-20a) —, is now in a situation that may enable him to accommodate his former companions in his new settlement. It is possible that the retainer, who has been reunited with his lord, is sending his lord's message to one of his former companions at home, who has not yet rejoined his lord in refuge. But even if this supposition is reserved for consideration in our reading of the poem, why did he make his letter read like one written for the perusal of his lord's wife, a woman separated from her husband?

Ongin mere secan, mæwes eþel,
 onsite sænacan, þæt þu suð heonan
 ofer merelade monnan findest,
 þær se þeoden is þin on wenum.
 Ne mæg him worulde willa gelimpan
 mara on gemyndum, þæs þe he me sægde,
 þonne inc geunne alwaldend god
 [.] ætsomne siþþan motan
 secgum ond gesiþum s[.]
 næglede beagas; he genoh hafað
 fædan gold[.]s [.]
]d elþeode eþel healde,
 fægre foldan [.]

Distribute treasure, the studded bracelets,
 To men and companions. He has enough
 Of burnished gold,
 Throughout the foreign people he holds domain,
 Fair earth
 Of devoted men, though here my friend. . . .
 Compelled by necessity, pushed out a boat,
 And on the expanses of waves alone had to
 Voyage on the sea, and eager for departure,
 Stir up the sea-currents. Now the man has
 Overcome his woes; he does not lack desired things—
 Horses, treasures, pleasures in the mead-hall,
 Any of the noble treasures on earth,
 A prince's daughter—if he owns you.] (26-47; my translation)

The key words that have led scholars to believe that the intended recipient of the message is unquestionably a woman, possibly the lord's wife or betrothed, are "richly adorned" (*sinchroden*; 14) and "a prince's daughter—if he owns you" (*þeodnes dohtor, gif he þin beneah*; 47). "*Sinchroden*" is an epithet often used in referring to a woman of high social rank.³ What I wish to emphasize at this point is that the critical misinterpretation of the whole work arises from taking the apparently feminine addressee literally as the refugee thane's wife. What the speaker emphasizes is that his thane in refuge has now everything necessary for reclaiming his former status as the chieftain of a band of warriors—with enough retainers and wealth that may enable him to reestablish himself as a strong military leader again—except a spouse of royal descent, who may enhance his social status as a true 'ring-giver.' If the addressee joins his camp, after making a journey over the waves, in spite of all the difficulties that may hinder it, then his former lord

³ In *Beowulf*, the epithet 'goldhroden,' similar to 'sinchroden' in meaning and the formation of a single word by combining a noun and the participial suffix '-hroden,' appears several times in referring to *Wealhþeow* (614, 640, etc.)

may become even stronger a commander of warriors, and eventually will act as a true 'ring-giver'—the way Hrothgar was with Wealhtheow as his queen—to extend the metaphor of reunion with his wife to reunion with a retainer, with whom he used to pledge lifelong loyalty and mutual commitment. This is what the line ("a prince's daughter—if he owns you") implies in the guise of appealing to the addressee to fulfill the oath of conjugal fidelity. To repeat what I have said, the message is not directed literally to "a prince's daughter," as scholars have believed, but to a retainer that the thane in refuge, trying to have his former political power restored, wishes to join his newly-built military camp.

When the refugee thane left his home in a hurry, it was due to the impending danger of physical harm: "A feud drove him away / from his powerful kinsfolk" (19b-20a), and "Compelled by necessity, pushed out a boat, / and on the expanses of waves alone had to / voyage on the sea, and eager for departure,/stir up the sea-currents" (40-43b). Surely, that kind of situation could have arisen in the course of a fight for political hegemony. And when he ran away to save his life, leaving his wife behind, he must have been well aware that she would be under strict watch and remain a hostage, so to speak. Moreover, since she is "a prince's daughter" (47), he must have been well aware that it would be impossible for her to embark on a voyage at will, while being in a strict house-arrest. He cannot be so thoughtless, or so uncaring, as to encourage her to get on her way to join her husband, despite all the risks involved. The retainer who writes the letter may have gotten the idea of addressing his letter to his lord's wife from his lord, or simply decided to do so, on his own. What matters, in view of the given situation, is that even if the letter falls into the hands of his lord's enemies, they would simply take it as a letter bearing a runaway man's longing for his beloved wife, and not suspect any clandestine attempt at reunion going on between their enemy and a man still loyal to him.

If the message was really from a man to his wife, why did he have to ask the message-deliverer to present a piece of wood carved with those enigmatic runic letters, as they appear in the last lines that conclude the message?

Ofer eald gebeot incer twega,
 gehyre ic ætsomne [two rune letters] geador
 [two rune letters] ond [one rune letter] aþe benemnan,
 þæt he þa wære ond þa winetreowe
 be him lifgendum læstan wolde,
 þe git on ærdagum oft gespræconn. (48-53)

[Concerning the old promise of you two,
 I hear together S and R sounding at the same time,
 EA, W, and M to declare by oath
 That he would fulfill while being alive
 The pledge and plight of lifelong fidelity,
 Which you two often agreed upon in the days gone.]
 (48-53; my translation)

No man, asking his beloved wife to come to him, after spending years building up military power and wealth that may enable him to attempt to regain the status of a ring-giver, would emphasize the wealth he has amassed in the meantime, and, furthermore, include some runic letters in his message to his beloved wife. When cryptic emblems or codes appear in a message, especially when it is delivered in the voice of a third person (the one whose voice is employed throughout the poem), the message should not be taken simply as a manifestation of simple love-longing. Surely there is a touch of underlying political implication. The poetic fragment smacks of a political scheme in action, despite its façade of a simple imploration for man-and-wife reunion.

We don't have to probe too far into a possibly complex political

entanglement and exert undue imagination to understand what goes on in a poetic fragment. All we have to do is to read it as it stands, and to interpret it only to the extent of what it tells us. A man of distinction in a tribe had to leave his homestead suddenly for some urgent reasons: “A feud drove him away / from his powerful kinsfolk” (19b-20a); “Compelled by necessity, pushed out a boat, / and on the expanses of waves alone had to / voyage on the sea, and eager for departure, / stir up the sea-currents” (40-43a). Now, after spending a number of years, living in exile and hardship, he has managed to build up a certain degree of military power and material prosperity in his newly found domain: “Now the man has / overcome his woes; he does not lack desired things – / horses, treasures, pleasures in the mead-hall, / any of the noble treasures on earth, / a prince’s daughter – if he owns you” (43b-47). The man living in exile has managed to build up a new power in the place where he lives in exile, and what he needs now to attain his political ambition is having his troop reinforced with his former retainers, who still stay behind at his original homestead.

Charles W. Kennedy, who published a Modern English version of Old English poetry more than a half-century ago, translated 43b-47 as follows:

Now his troubles are over and all distress,
 He lacks no wealth that the heart may wish,
 Jewels and horses and joys of the hall,
 Nor any fair treasure that earth can afford.
 O Prince’s daughter! if he may possess thee, . . . (13)

He punctuated in such a way that “*peodnes dohtor*” is being treated as in the vocative case; accordingly, he read the message as an infallibly personal one from the refugee lord to his wife. No wonder scholars have unanimously shared the notion that the addressee in the fragment is a woman—the refugee lord’s wife—rather than a former retainer of his, who is left behind at his old homestead, and whom the lord ardently wishes to

make a journey over the waves for reunion. The old pledges and plights between the lord and his beloved retainer (the addressee) are repeatedly invoked for the sake of remembrance. The whole poetic fragment is an unidentified refugee thane's message to his beloved retainer strongly tied to him by the oaths of *comitatus*.

A word on the poetic subgenre the fragment may be allocated to. R. F. Leslie classified "The Husband's Message" as an 'elegy.' 'Elegy' means a work that laments the death of a person, or making an utterance over the general human misery categorically. But can we apply the term 'elegy' in defining the character of the work? I doubt. There is not the tone and mood in the fragment that may justify the use of the term, 'elegy' or 'elegiac.' The epistle supposedly written by a retainer to his lord's wife (at least on the surface level) reads more like a message from a political schemer (loyal to his lord) to his pal, whom he wishes very much to join his camp for his lord's triumphant return to his old homestead as the final winner in the tribal feud.

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ABSTRACT**The Old English “Husband’s Message”: Is It an ‘Elegy’? Is the One Sending the Message a ‘Husband’? Is the Addressee His ‘Wife’?****Sung-Il Lee**

The Old English poetic fragment universally referred to as “The Husband’s Message” has been interpreted simply as the message that a lord living in exile sends to his wife or betrothed, asking her to make a journey across the sea for familial reunion. The message is being delivered in the voice of a retainer, who has recently attained reunion with his lord by crossing the sea. The appearance of the words denoting femininity—“sincroden” and “þeodnes dohtor”—in reference to the addressee notwithstanding, the fact that the whole message is being delivered by an intermediary, whose voice is employed throughout the fragment, indicates that the message should not be read only on its surface level. I argue that the husband-to-wife message is only a façade, a frame set for covering a political implication of the work—an exiled lord urging a former retainer of his to come and join his newly built camp. A political situation involving the reinforcement of one’s military power in preparation for an upcoming feudal strife necessitates the deceptive frame of a husband sending his message to his wife or betrothed. There is nothing ‘elegiac’ in the fragment, and no romantic longing for one’s faraway spouse. Only the exiled lord’s desire to have his camp reinforced with the help of a retainer he had to leave behind at his old homestead.

Key Words | intermediary, political implication, intended addressee, critical misinterpretation, cryptic emblems or codes, oaths of *comitatus*

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