

Surrounded by Ambiguity: Landscape and Language in ‘Wulf and Eadwacer’.

DANIELS Andrew

The poem now often called ‘Wulf and Eadwacer’¹ has ‘fascinated readers since the Victorian period’² and interest in its ambiguous meanings has led to many varied interpretations over the last century in particular. Recent studies regarding its meaning have focused on the possible relationships between characters within the poem, the ambiguity of its language, the importance of the female voice in the context of an Anglo-Saxon warrior society, and even suggestions of the poem as a gay text.³ The debate over its meaning is also a popular topic amongst general enthusiasts online and clips of its ‘performance’ are numerous and varied.⁴ In this short essay, I wish to look briefly at the depiction of place within the poem of which relatively little has been discussed in the literature, and in doing so reflect on how the language of the speaker mirrors this landscape and creates a heightened sense of emotional outpouring.

I agree with Donohue that lacking an appropriate context for a modern audience and without any ‘uniform consensus with regard to reading the poem’⁵, a

1 It is important, however, to note that the oldest surviving manuscript is untitled, and the present title was penned in the 19th century. Today some scholars (see Crossley-Holland and Mitchell for example) prefer to use the simpler ‘Wulf’ as a title.

2 Magennis, p.56

3 See Aibhilin Inghean Daibhidh ‘Wulf and Eadwacer’ A look at Anglo-Saxon Poetry’, Patricia Belanoff ‘Women’s songs, Women’s Language’, Peter Baker ‘The Ambiguity of Wulf and Eadwacer’ and David Clark ‘Between Medieval Men: Male Friendship and Desire in Early Medieval English Literature.’

4 See Michael Drout at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8EoakNiIPkY> and an interesting take on the poem in animated form with music at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SbwbuDc-oT8>

5 James J Donohue ‘“Of this I can make no sense” Wulf and Eadwacer and the Destabilization of Meaning’

definitive understanding escapes today's reader. Yet the fact that the poem is, to borrow a word from the original text, 'biworpen' or 'surrounded' by ambiguity, does not lead to a sense of disappointment. On the contrary, it creates myriad possibilities, indistinct paths along which we might explore meanings within the mysterious fen background from where the poem calls.

There are hints as to the setting of this work, but again like the poem itself, they are fragmented, insubstantial and in a final reckoning as unreliable as the environment must have been for Anglo-Saxons settled there. In lines 4 and 5 we do get a description of place,

"Wulf is on iege, ic on oðerre
Fæst is det eglongd, fenne biworpen."

This is a clear reference to islands within a fen landscape, the only example of a 'concrete' setting⁶. Glenn, in his translation of the word 'faest' uses 'fast' which in itself suggests 'imprisoned or 'held captive'.⁷ While giving us a sense of the dilemma facing the speaker and Wulf in this fenland where freedom of movement cannot be guaranteed, it fails to deliver a precise geographical location. Hunter-Blair tells us that 'Fen, no less than forest was a dominant feature in parts of the Anglo-Saxon landscape.' If we acknowledge that 'in the east....fenland was a controlling factor'⁸, and if we agree with Wrenn that the poem's 'language suggests an Anglian origin'⁹, we might hazard a guess at a more precise location. However, while the speaker makes clear one of the islands is 'faest' we are still left won-

6 See John Lye's page at <https://brocku.ca/english/jlye/criticalreading.php>

7 Glenn, J. (1982) L5 at lightspill.com/poetry/oe/wulf_eadwacer.html

8 Hunter-Blair, P. p252

9 Wrenn, C. L. p85

dering whether this means 'fortified,' 'strong' or merely 'on firm ground,'¹⁰ as Mitchell implies. Could it be an East Anglian setting like the island of Ely, which remained an island until the 17th century, and could it perhaps involve a feud between two tribes in the locality, such as the North and South Gyrwas (fen dwellers) who were documented as living in these marginal fen lands?

In the name 'Wulf' which is mentioned 5 times in the poem we have perhaps another clue pointing to East Anglian origins. Dr. Sam Newton in his studies on this area and the Wuffingas dynasty notes that 'etymologically the name Wuffa appears to be a diminutive variant of Wulf and this can be understood to mean 'Little Wulf'.¹¹ Does this information allied together with the word 'hwelp' in line 16, which Glenn translates as 'sorry whelp' bring us any closer to an understanding? Could the speaker's cry 'Wulf, min Wulf' contain some connection to Wuffingas or Wulingas, 'the kin of the Wolf'? Like a landscape under a fenland mist, the answer becomes clear for a moment and then once more is shrouded in uncertainty. Indeed, as much as Old English poetry is traditional and has its roots in a common Germanic past, there is also a possibility that the location pre-dates the coming of the Anglo-Saxons to Britain, and could be set somewhere in Frisian, North German or Danish territories. As a result, the modern reader is left to consider whether all of these things are ultimately unimportant. More worthy of our attention is perhaps the sense of marginality of both place and speaker that is key to the 'tonal' structure, and how 'connotative'¹² implications of the dreary fen give the poem substance through language full of melancholy and despair.

This setting on marginal lands helps to heighten the sorrowfulness of the words

10 Mitchell, B. p.309

11 Quoted on the homepage of Dr. S. Newton at <http://wuffingas.co.uk>

12 See John Lye's page at <https://brocku.ca/english/jlye/criticalreading.php>

uttered and creates a staggeringly emotional cry of longing which is set deep within the speaker herself and also deep within this ambiguous shifting geographical landscape. The marginality of place is echoed in the 'outside' status of the relationship between the speaker and Wulf, the speaker and 'Eadwacer' and even the speaker and the 'hwelp'. We seem to be in a borderland, indistinct terrain that might be termed 'edgeland'.¹³ Here island borders and borders of love that cannot be crossed generate great anxiety in the mind of the speaker. The female voice uses vocabulary that stresses this anxiety including *renig/rainy*, *reo-tugu/weeping/wailing* (line 10), *murnende /sorrow/mourning* (line 15) and *lad/evil/noxious* (line 12). The nineteen lines are peppered with this kind of vocabulary, heightening the emotionally charged feel of the poem. There are nuances of sexual tension, frustration, violence and deep seated longing which build like a storm cloud over the fen before breaking in the keening of the speaker, particularly from line 13 onward with the haunting 'Wulf, min Wulf'.

Wrenn has stated that 'the Anglo-Saxon temperament did not lend itself to the making of love poetry' and as such " 'Wulf and Eadwacer' ...is the nearest thing to a love-lyric in Old English."¹⁴ However, what is most astonishing about this poem is the 'simplicity of its very direct language and the musical element in its verse'.¹⁵ This comment seems justified if we listen to online renditions,¹⁶ although it has to be said that the majority are disappointingly from male voices. The elegiac quality of the lament is very persuasive and puts one in mind of modern songs in which a female voice in the throes of despair suggests a magnificent height of longing. Billie Holiday's moving version of 'Gloomy Sunday' with the line 'the

13 See Paul Farley's work with Michael Symmons Roberts

14 Wrenn p150

15 Ibid p84

16 Drout, M. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8EoakNiIPkY>

shadows I live with are numberless' and Piaf's 'Hymne à l'Amour' with its heart rendering appeals seem to equate to this unknown female from a distant past, from an indecipherable landscape.

The poem seems to hinge, from my reading, on the fact that the woman is caught in a marginal land in a situation not entirely of her own making. Perhaps she is a peace-weaver¹⁷, a pacifier of the male war-urge, given over to one tribe in order to secure a tenuous peace between two groups. In the poem both groups we learn through the refrain of lines 2 and 7,

'willað hȳ hine āþecgan gif hē on prēat cymeð'

and the word 'fierce' 'wælrēowe' in line 6, are in some way ill-disposed to one another. Perhaps there is a feud between the two camps. Does the speaker hold the key to avoiding further bloodshed, but as a result is left to lament her fate, caught outside the traditional boundaries of belonging in Anglo-Saxon society? If this is the case, then the landscape reflects this. The ambiguous nature of her predicament is highlighted in the language of the physical geography,

'Wulf is on iegel, ic on oþerre'

and the lamentable consequences of being in this place between borders, between peoples, between love, is mirrored in the uncertainty of her language in the pivotal line 12

'wæs me wyn to þon, wæs me hwæðre eac lād'.

17 For a concise explanation of peace-weavers see Ellen Amatangelo's short piece at Utah Valley University research.uvu.edu/mcdonald/Anglo.../wife'slament/wifepeacew.html

The inner conflicts which work in her love-sick mind are highlighted in this very telling and poetically skilled line which in Old English with the natural caesura creates both a physical boundary in the poem itself and expresses the conflicting sentiments that leave her 'in between'.

What we are left with is the beauty of a fragmented poem which creates 'a passionate intensification of grief'.¹⁸ This grief allows the text to be appreciated, despite either its lack of clear narrative or an obvious physical setting, as a poem 'where emotion.....dominates the utterance'.¹⁹ As such, the story and location gain greater appeal because of their allusive qualities.

'Ungelic is us' (Lines 3 and 8) becomes not merely the refrain of the speaker and Wulf in their differences, but also relates to us now as readers caught outside of the Anglo-Saxon world and its defined boundaries of meaning. Our understanding as a modern audience is compromised by the fact we too are on a different 'island,' where a lack of cultural, historical and social knowledge about Wulf and the speaker creates further boundaries. In the end though, this is unimportant. What matters is that through the lone grief-stricken cry of a rare female voice emanating from a nameless fenland the poem draws us in again and again demanding to be heard.

18 Alain Renoir quoted in <http://homepages.bw.edu/~uncover/wulfpreface.htm>

19 Magennis p156

Bibliography

Crossley-Holland, K. The Anglo-Saxon World: An Anthology Translated by Kevin Crossley-Holland Oxford World's Classics O.U.P. 1999

Donohue, J.J. '“Of this I can make no sense” Wulf and Eadwacer and the Destabilization of Meaning' in Medieval Forum at <https://www.sfsu.edu/~medieval/Volume4/Donahue.html> Retrieved June 2016

Farley, P. and Symmons Roberts, M. Edgelands Vintage Press 2012

Hunter-Blair, P. Anglo-Saxon England C.U.P. 1956

Magennis, H. The Cambridge Introduction to Anglo-Saxon Literature C.U.P. 2011

Mitchell, B. An Invitation to Old English and Anglo-Saxon England Blackwell 1995

Wrenn, C. L. A Study of Old English Literature Harrap 1967

論文要旨

抄 録

ダニエルズ・アンドリュース

この論文は、「Wulf and Eadwacer」として知られているアングロサクソンの断片的な詩を考察するものである。

詩のなかの両義性と、話し言葉（アングロサクソンの詩においては非常に稀な女性的表現）が、風景をどのように描写しているか、感情をどう表しているのについて分析する。

キーワード アングロサクソン 風景 両義性 詩