

Wulf and Eadwacer

Dave Sinclair

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Wulf and Eadwacer is a nineteen-line alliterative Old English poem of unknown author and uncertain date of composition. There is just one source for this poem: folios 100v-101r of the 10th century Exeter Book (Krapp, 1936). Written in the first person, the speaker in the poem appears to be female, but gives enigmatic and incomplete information about her situation. Critics have seen the poem as a fragment of Germanic legend (Sheils, 2022), a fragment of larger epic poem, (Frankis, 1962)), an elegy for a dead son (Frese, 1990), a commentary on the relationship between mother and son (Osborne, 1992), a Cynewulfian rune poem (Lawrence, 1902) or even a canine/lupine love story (Sedgefield, 1931).

In this analysis we concentrate the interpretation of *Wulf and Eadwacer* in its various modern English translations. Translations distance us from the original as we must rely on the translators' sensibilities in expressing the Anglo-Saxon author's intent. One translation issue is that not all the original Old English words used in the poem have known modern equivalents. To address this, some translators provide 'a best guess' while others may provide multiple alternatives for a single word. For example, Shiels (2022) translates the first two lines of the poem as: "For my people it is as if someone is giving them/him a gift/favour/sacrifice/battle." Other translators choose to leave the original Old English words in place, where there is no clear, direct modern English equivalent, as in Bruch (na, II): "They'll rip him apart if he approaches their pack. / Ungelīc is ūs!". The modern reader must then deduce the meaning from the context around the Old English – a difficult task in such a complex poem.

The most common interpretation of the poem is perhaps that of a lover's lament. Glenn (1982) provides a translation which can be matched to this interpretation: "Wulf is on one

island, I on another.” (l. 2) describes the lover’s separation, occasioned by Wulf’s raiding that island: “they will receive him, if he with threat comes” (l. 7); and this warrior role and associated separation is the cause of the speaker’s lament: “Wulf, my Wulf, my hopes of thee / sickened me, thy seldom-coming, / a mourning mind, not lack of food.” (ll. 13-15). The introduction of the speaker’s address to a third character, Eadwacer, in line 16 though casts doubt on a simple warrior-lover relationship between the speaker and Wulf and the ambiguous use of ‘our’ in the next line: “Our sorry whelp / A Wulf bears to woods.” (ll. 16-17) suggests the whelp might be the speaker’s son by Eadwacer, who has been abducted by Wulf, or could also be the son of Wulf and the speaker. Further ambiguity arises as Glenn uses a capital for Wulf in line 17 suggesting a man rather than an animal – other translators use lower-case, suggesting an animal (Martin, na; Liuzza, 2014). The marital status of the speaker becomes questionable as she suggests “One easily slits what never was joined: our song together.” (Glenn, 1982, ll. 18-19). The song presumably is a metaphor for marriage, and the ease of ‘slitting’ it suggests that the speaker is not married, and the ‘whelp’ is probably illegitimate.

One of the oddities of the poem is that it appears to contain a refrain. Together with *Deor* it is only one of two Old English poems that do so. On closer examination, it is perhaps questionable that *Wulf and Eadwacer* contains a refrain. In *Deor* the refrain is a full line and appears at the end of each stanza except one: “Pæs ofereode, þisses swa mæg – that was overcome, so may this be”) (Early-Medieval-England.net, na). On the other hand, in *Wulf and Eadwacer* the refrain (“Willað hy hine aþecgan, gif he on þreat cymeð. / Ungelic is us - They will consume him if he comes into their troop. / It is different/unlike for us.”) is not a complete number of lines and only appears twice, on lines 4-5 and 7-8 and is thus not used throughout the poem (Traherne, 2004). It is therefore questionable whether this meets the

definition of a standard refrain (OED, 2023). Perhaps the lines are repeated more for dramatic emphasis than adherence to a formal refrain form.

As discussed, when examining Glenn's translation, a common interpretation is that the narrator is a woman who is in love with Wulf but is held apart from him by Eadwacer (Greenfield, 1986). Within this interpretation, the questions of whether the speaker is married (and if so to whom), whose whelp is it, and what is the fate of the whelp (raised by the speaker, or Wulf, or torn apart in vengeance) have varying answers. Other translators have viewed Eadwacer as something more complex than a simple antagonist to Wulf. Eadwacer can be interpreted as a compound word, usually translated as "property-watcher." This suggests he is the guardian of the speaker, and thus places him in opposition to Wulf. Burch (na), for instance, sees Eadwacer as "a priest (Heaven-Watcher), a guardian (Property-Watcher), a family member appointed to "protect" her "purity"" and provides five possible translations. For line 16 these include "Have you heard, Eadwacer? Watchdog!" (I), "Have you heard, Heaven-Watcher?" (II) and "Have you heard, Eadwacer?" (V). Such multiple translations are a valuable assistance to the non Old English reader in considering the poem's content.

In other interpretations (Morcom, 2024) Eadwacer is seen as a representation of God rather than a specific historical figure. Morton argues that the use of "compound words which take ead as their first element ... reveals a semantic field overwhelmingly associated with Christian figures and values" and that "wacer not in relation to neutral watchfulness but rather, more specifically, in the context of pastoral guardianship and alertness to the threat of sin, [is] typically associated with the figure of the wolf" (p. 11). Morcom also suggests that the imprisonment of the unnamed narrator becomes a spiritual conflict and that the final lines of the poem can then be read as a prayer of supplication. Morcom's sees the narrator as asking God to grant "her emotional and spiritual separation from Wulf to match her physical

condition following her desertion” (p. 11) and that this balances the speaker’s intense distress by her tortured relationship to Wulf, that characterised the earlier parts of the poem.

Other translations however provides little support for this view: Teharne (2004) translates these lines as: “That may be easily separated which was never bound / the riddle of us two together” while Glen (1982) suggests “One easily slits what never was joined: / our song together” and Hostetter (2020) uses “How easily it all comes apart, / what was hardly together / the song we made as one.” None of these seem to map to a direct request to either a pagan or Christian deity to dissolve the speaker’s religious contract. Indeed, it seems more likely that the speaker is acknowledging she never was married. Or is she mocking Eadwacer because she has not been married to him, even though he has possessed her physically? This might lend credence to the possibility that Wulf is indeed her proper husband, and his outlaw status is keeping him away.

In Tasoiulas’s analysis (1996), Wulf is deemed to be the son of Eadwacer and the unmarried speaker and has been abandoned to die because of his illegitimacy. This assessment matches the lines where Tasoiulas’s translation makes the narrator address Eadwacer: “Gehyrest ldu Eadwacer? Uncerne earne bireö wulf to wuda”(“Do you hear Eadwacer ? The wolf bears our earne to the woods”) (p. 4). This suggests that Wulf is being given to the speaker’s people, and highlights the grief of the speaker at the whelp being taken by the wolf.

However, returning to the so called refrain, “they will kill him if he comes to their troop” (Tasoiulas, 1996, p. 11) it can be seen this line does not align with Wulf being the speaker’s child. An infant or young child taken to the woods by a wolf cannot “come” to anyone, and rather must lie where they are left. Since this line is repeated, or even regarded as a refrain, this line must have a high importance, and we should conclude therefore that Wulf surely must be mobile and cannot therefore be the welp or the narrator’s infant.

In the end, it seems it seems unlikely that a consensus will ever be achieved regarding the interpretation of *Wulf and Eadwacer* (Baker, 1981). Studying it in its English translation further complicates the matter, as the personal perspectives of the translators inevitably add further variability to the interpretation. And new interpretations may yet still arise. One occurring to the current author is that the poem was invented by the same monk that transcribed the legitimate *Deor* poem, with the waggish intent of puzzling and perplexing his colleagues and who inserted a few plausible, but imaginary Anglo-Saxon words as markers to indicate that the poem was a forgery. In any case, a consensus of interpretation may not necessarily be crucial. Every reader will find their own personal interpretation within this poem. Benjamin Thorpe famously said of the poem "Of this, I can make no sense." (Thorpe and Corson, 1842). But he misses the point. There is great value to the reader in the process of personal exploration of the poem even if no unified conclusion can be reached.

(1560 words)

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