

Lover and Lord: Gendered Displays of Fealty in “The Wife’s Lament” and *The Lord of the Rings*

Shelby Jay

Faculty Mentor: Dr. Stephanie Batkie

University of Montevallo

As one of the two Anglo Saxon poems with a female voice, “The Wife’s Lament” offers an alternative presentation of one’s connection to their lord and the proper way to demonstrate loyalty to them. While highlighting the elegiac themes of isolation and loss, which can be seen in masculine Anglo Saxon poems like “The Wanderer,” the notably obscure language in “The Wife’s Lament” lends itself to be interpreted in multiple ways – particularly in terms of the gendered language surrounding the idea of loyalty. Using Judith Butler, Shari Horner explains that “gender is not a stable or fixed identity; rather it must be understood as a repeated set of culturally and socially established acts, and it is this reputation which constitutes the appearance of a stable gendered self.”¹ Within “The Wife’s Lament,” these repeated expressions are then used to form heteronormative displays of loyalty. Horner discusses how “‘The Wanderer’ and ‘The Seafarer,’ evoke imagery of voyaging, wandering, and unfettered movement”—and that it is “this distinction [that] marks a crucial difference between the ‘male’ and ‘female’ Old English elegies.”² Horner’s analysis is useful in distinguishing how masculine loyalty is directly tied to action while feminine fealty can be traced back to immobility or passivity. Especially in regards to “The Wife’s Lament,” feminine loyalty to one’s lord is also often highly conflated with romantic love. However, this paper will argue that the speaker of the poem displays her want of action through feminine terms of romantic stasis, which is further hinted at through her various employment of platonic terms of loyalty.

Tolkien also reflects this gendered display of fealty along with the obfuscated love language of “The Wife’s Lament” through the portrayal of Eowyn in *The Lord of the Rings*, specifically in how she initially mistakes her feelings for Aragorn as romantic rather than platonic. Two instances in the text will be useful in examining this claim in regards to Eowyn’s own transition from a feminine and therefore romantic, form of fealty to a platonically masculine display of loyalty. The moments in question are when the Rohirrim leave for Helms Deep and when Eowyn attempts to convince Aragorn to not go down the Paths of the Dead. Her very deliberate confusion between lover and lord functions to highlight the problematic nature of framing romance with masculine language of loyalty. When Eowyn discovers the true nature of her feelings as decidedly platonic and then proceeds to go into battle rather than remain in the hall, she—again, like the Wife in “The Wife’s Lament”—presents a challenge to gendered roles of fealty.

¹ Horner, Shari, “En/closed Subjects: *The Wife’s Lament* and the Culture of Early Medieval Female Monasticism,” *Old English Literature*. Ed. R. M Liuzza :Yale University Press, 2002. 381.

² Horner, “En/closed Subjects,” 383-384.

The Wife establishes herself as “forced”³ into her exile, saying that her “lord commanded [her] to live...in a forest grove, / under an oak tree in an earthen cave.”⁴ This situation results in a “torment” of intrinsic sorrow for the Speaker.⁵ However, the Speaker’s feminine loyalty to her lord mingles with her romantic “longing” for her husband.⁶ Helene Scheck says that “the nature of desire in [“The Wife’s Lament”] may just as easily be rooted in male fantasy. The woman bereft of her husband is just as lost as the warrior without his lord—a parallel that implies the impossibility or unacceptability of female autonomy.”⁷ Scheck’s idea helps confirm this assertion that the heteronormative nature of feminine loyalty is firmly grounded in the romantic. Eowyn’s intrinsic sorrow at the thought of her passive immobility in comparison to the men’s action can be seen when she explains to Theoden that ““a year shall [she] endure for every day that passes until his return;”” however, when she says this, she is not looking at Theoden but at Aragorn.⁸ Eowyn’s lord is also her uncle. Therefore, in her attempt to properly perform female fealty, she subconsciously searches for a more romantically suitable lord. She finds this lord when she sees Aragorn, which further highlights the issue of merging feminine loyalty with feminine romance.

Despite the fact that “The Wife’s Lament” displays this conflation of lover and lord, the speaker utilizes a masculine tone of action when she explains how “first [her] lord left his people / over the tumbling waves; [she] worried at dawn / where on earth [her] leader of men might be” and then she “set[s] out [herself] in [her] sorrow.”⁹ These lines exhibit a masculine concern for a loss of leadership rather than romantic companionship. This type of grief recalls the masculine themes and tone of “The Wanderer” and the *comitatus*. As Patricia Belonoff philologically explains that the speaker’s “language [is] not applicable to a male/female relationship,” specifically in her use of words and phrases that “are all translatable as ‘lord,’” but “are inappropriate epithets for a woman to use of her husband.”¹⁰ Here, the feminine voice is working in such a way that it mirrors the masculine anxiety of losing one’s lord and the exile that awaits – effectively blending both masculine and feminine modes of fealty. In *The Lord of the Rings*, these hints of masculinity are present when Eowyn “heard of the battle in Helm’s Deep and the

³ “The Wife’s Lament,” *Old English Poetry: An Anthology*. Trans. and Ed. Stephen O. Glousecki. Trans and Ed. R. M. Liuzza. Toronto: Broadview, 2014. Line 27.

⁴ *Ibid.*, Line 15, 27-28.

⁵ *Ibid.*, Line 5.

⁶ *Ibid.*, Line 14.

⁷ Scheck, Helene, “Seductive Voices: Rethinking Female Subjectivities in *The Wife’s Lament* and *Wulf and Eadwacer*.” *Literature Compass* 5.2 (2008): 224.

⁸ Tolkien, J. R. R., *The Lord of the Rings*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2004. 523.

⁹ “The Wife’s Lament,” Line 6-9.

¹⁰ Belanoff, Patricia A., “Women’s Songs, Women’s Language: ‘Wulf and Eadwacer’ and ‘The Wife’s Lament.’” *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990. 197.

great slaughter of their foes” from Aragorn and “her eyes shone.”¹¹ Her instant masculine delight in the glory that came to the men through the battle are the beginnings of the indication that she views Aragorn as a lord and not as a lover. Eowyn’s inclination towards masculine fealty causes her to misinterpret her feelings for Aragorn as romantic rather than platonic through her subconscious effort to conform to methods of feminine loyalty. This idea is strongly reinforced when Eowyn personally tells Aragorn that she would not have him go down the Paths of the Dead because she “would not see a thing that is high and excellent cast away needlessly.”¹² Instead, she reasons that he should remain with the Rohirrim and “lead to war” these “men of renown and prowess.”¹³ Through her fealty, Eowyn—like the Wife—is displaying a masculine military pragmatism towards her lord rather than a sentimental concern for a lover’s safety.

Tolkien’s divergence from the Anglo-Saxon poem’s obscure gendered loyalty is reflected in Eowyn’s response to Aragorn hinting at his romantic relationship with Arwyn. Eowyn’s response does not reflect the expected devastation from one who has just been rejected by someone they love romantically. Instead, “for a while she was silent, as if pondering what this might mean. Then suddenly she laid her hand on his arm. ‘You are a stern lord and resolute,’ she said; ‘and thus do men win renown.’”¹⁴ Eowyn’s overtly platonic response to the first even remotely romantic statement from her supposed “lover” can be interpreted as an indication that she no longer regards him as such. Eowyn tells Aragorn that the men that follow him into battle do so “only because they would not be parted from [him] – because they love [him].”¹⁵ In bringing up how the men are allowed to follow Aragorn into battle solely for platonic love and loyalty, Eowyn is effectively linking her own reasons for wanting to go into battle with Aragorn—because she loves him as a lord and not as a lover. By commenting on his leadership abilities and linking them to the masculine priority of winning glory in battle, Eowyn is openly displaying a masculine form of fealty. This “pondering” that takes place before she speaks, especially in regards to her eventual verbal response, lends itself to the idea that Eowyn realizes her internal confusion in regards to her feelings for Aragorn – as if she was attempting to tease out she could be loyal to him without being romantically involved with him.

Eowyn’s uncertainty in how to display loyalty can be seen again when she asks Aragorn to let her ride with him. She explains that she is “weary of skulking in the hills, and wish[es] to face peril and battle.”¹⁶ This statement not only functions to assert her masculine fealty by desiring to win personal renown in battle, but also undercuts the honor of feminine stasis by labeling it as “skulking.” When Aragorn tells her no, that her duty is to her people, she responds that “too often [she has] heard of duty” and that she has been “waiting on faltering feet long enough” and “since they falter no longer, it seems, may [she] not now spend [her] life as [she]

¹¹ Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 783.

¹² *Ibid.*, 785.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 783.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 784.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 785.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 784.

will?"¹⁷ This "faltering" is noteworthy in that Eowyn is recognizing her own inability to conform to the performative binary of displaying loyalty to one's lord. Rather than continue trying to see Aragorn as a lover, she acknowledges the previously unthinkable concept of perceiving Aragorn solely as a lord. Eowyn's performative fealty openly transitions to masculine—a transition that the Wife never fully realizes—but Eowyn's struggle between masculine and feminine displays of loyalty conveys the idea of gender identification desires, desires which *can* be observed in the Anglo-Saxon poem.

As stated before, the narrator speaks of desire and longing throughout the poem, desire which can and previously has been interpreted as sexual/romantic. However, especially after the Wife's description of her place of exile, she mentions that she "ache[s] with longing."¹⁸ In light of Eowyn's internal struggle between passivity and action, lines describing how the Wife's "lord's leaving / often fiercely seized" her, can now be read in a whole new light. Like Eowyn, the speaker shrouds her desire for masculine action through the socially acceptable idea of feminine romantic stasis. Helene Scheck discusses how in female voiced Anglo-Saxon elegy poems "the narrators are not passive victims, but women who vociferously protest their subjugation."¹⁹ The end, and often the most confusing part of "The Wife's Lament," can be better understood through this idea of desire as action and not static romance. The reader is left with a blatantly bitter tone, claiming "woe to the one / who must wait with longing for a loved one."²⁰ Through these lines, it is clear that the speaker is not conveying love but bitterness in regards to her stasis. There is a certain jadedness in the speaker's commitment to doing what is expected of her. Barrie Ruth Straus says that "The way the wife tells her story—that is, the way she uses her 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."²¹ Even though the speaker does not actually break free of the societal expectations that hold her in a position that she is unhappy with, she wonderfully masks her dissent with obscure language of desire which can be interpreted as romantic longing rather than a longing for action. Her tone of dissatisfaction in regards to the expectations of feminine fealty is reflected in Eowyn's response to Aragorn who claims that Eowyn should not go to battle but stay with the people because it is her duty.

'Shall I always be chosen?' [Eowyn says] bitterly. 'Shall I always be left behind when the Riders depart...All your words are but to say: you are a woman, and your part is in the house. But when the men have died in battle and honour, you have leave to be burned in the house, for the men will need it no more...'²²

Eowyn's bitterness reflects that of the speaker in "The Wife's Lament" through their mutual perception of feminine subjugation. Straus explains that "In a culture where heroism is closely

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ "The Wife's Lament," Line 29.

¹⁹ Scheck., 221.

²⁰ "The Wife's Lament," Line 52-53.

²¹ Straus, Barrie Ruth, "Women's Words as Weapons: Speech as Action in 'The Wife's Lament.'" *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 23.2 (1981): 270.

²² Tolkien, 784.

... tied to fame and shame..., a narrative which allows an awareness of the patriarchal order as a cause of the unhappy fate of women and which ends with a curse heaping woe on the specific males who perpetuate that order is a surprisingly strong weapon.”²³ As mentioned before, Eowyn discredits the honor of stasis in comparison to the glory that men are allowed to achieve. Because women are kept from battle, Eowyn’s words could be a reflection of the hegemonic power that these gendered displays of loyalty uphold in favor of her patriarchal society.

The obscure language that the Speaker in “The Wife’s Lament” uses can be interpreted a romantic desire for her lord or an underlying desire to shirk the expectation that the feminine form of fealty has placed upon her – effectively internally questioning and disagreeing with the feminine tradition of stasis and exile. Tolkien takes this challenge to gendered displays of fealty one step further through Eowyn’s active participation in the battle at Minis Tirith. In making this decision to literally have Eowyn go into battle, Tolkien could be commenting on the suppression of feminine capability within Anglo Saxon literature and the lack of glory that they were allowed to obtain beyond that of peaceweaving.

²³ Straus, 281

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Notes