FEMALE CHARACTERISATION IN OLD ENGLISH POETRY

by

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ABSTRACT

A survey of Old English poetry suggests that greater originality is to be found in the presentation of situations involving female, rather than exclusively male, characters. This phenomenon can be related to a double background of social and literary conditions. An investigation of the social position of Anglo-Saxon women on the basis of contemporary historical records reveals that, contrary to the received opinion, the status of Anglo-Saxon women was mainly a subordinate and passive one. However, there are certain exceptions to the general rule, and the position of women improved in the course of the era. An examination of the techniques of characterisation in Old English poetry shows that they are based on a series of contrasting and interlocking stereotypes, which, allowing for a degree of archaism and selectivity, for the most part correspond to the typical conditions of actual life. Almost all the examples of significant departures from the stereotypes occur in association with women characters.

The proverbial poetry and the poems treating traditional Germanic subjects present some rather sketchy portraits of women based on the stereotype of the good queen. However, the highly skilled Beowulf poet takes this standard type and uses it for his own ends: as a vehicle of pathos and tragic irony in the poem. The poems belonging to the "saint's
life" genre utilise the other main female stereotype: the saint. Because the outlines of this type are rigid and unnatural, little individual characterisation is to be found within this category. The two Old English love lyrics, The Wife's Lament and Wulf and Eadwacer, take the traditional subject of exile, and, with considerable psychological insight, apply it to a new situation: the separation, not of a warrior from lord and comrades, but of a woman from husband or lover. The most striking examples of originality are to be found in the temptation scene of Genesis B and in Division VII of Christ I. Here, the encounters between Adam and Eve, and Joseph and Mary, respectively, are treated with freedom, and a realism most unusual in Old English poetry.

The explanation for the greater originality present in the treatment of female characters, and situations involving them, lies in the passive roles to which women were normally confined, both in Old English poetry and in Anglo-Saxon society. This passivity led the poets into a deeper exploration of thought and feeling, and into a portrayal of intimate relationships not provided for by the ready-made traditions of the poetry. Paradoxically, the very category of female characters which is not restricted to a passive role, i.e., that containing the saints, is the most rigid and least lifelike.

If we leave out the saints' poems, it is possible to show a chronological development in the pattern of female characterisation. The proverbial poetry and the poetry on
traditional Germanic themes constitute an early stratum, the two love poems are somewhat later, and *Genesis B* and *Christ I* latest of all. A corresponding increase in psychological insight can be traced in these three groups. A growing humanism in the Anglo-Saxon era is, thus, reflected in the poetry in an increasing interest in the situation of passive, female characters. This development foreshadows wider movements in medieval Europe, notably, the rise of the lyric, and the growth of the literature of courtly love.
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INTRODUCTION

Probably the first observation that springs to mind in connection with the female characters of Old English poetry is that they are few. In the corpus of Old English poetry as a whole, women characters play a distinctly minor part. However, it has struck me that some of the more interesting effects created in that poetry in fact involve female figures: the Beowulf poet makes an evocative use of his female characters, especially Wealhtheow and Hildeburh, in showing the tragic effects of feud; the temptation of Adam by Eve in Genesis B is a highly dramatic and strikingly heterodox presentation of the Fall of Man; the dialogue between Joseph and Mary in Division VII of Christ I is a miniature drama presented with a great deal of human sympathy; the two love lyrics with female narrators, Wulf and Eadwacer and The Wife's Lament are unique in Old English poetry in dealing seriously with sexual love. It looks as if, in these cases, the treatment of female characters has inspired the poets to greater inventiveness. One is led to ask how and why this may be so. Is there indeed a greater originality in the creation of female figures? What general tendencies lie behind this trend? Is the relatively minor role of women characters in the poetry a contributing factor? What historical circumstances might be relevant?
And how can the pattern of female characterisation in Old English poetry be related to the broader trends of European literature in the Middle Ages?

The following thesis aims to answer these questions. Since the pattern emerging from female characterisation in the poetry is to be related to broader influences, it is important to establish the immediate historical and literary background. This study, then, begins in Chapter I with a thoroughgoing analysis of the social position of women in Anglo-Saxon England. The conclusions which emerge in this preliminary investigation form the basis of my final inferences about the nature and significance of trends in the poetic treatment of women. The broad outlines of the literary background are subsequently presented, in Chapter II. That is, the characterisation of women implies a comparison with the characterisation of men, and, therefore, the general techniques of character-drawing, mainly seen in the creation of male characters, are summarised in this chapter. The remaining chapters focus directly on the poems and passages which make significant use of women characters. Chapter III deals with what we may call the traditional poetry, i.e., the poetry rooted in native, Germanic material. The subject of Chapter IV is the Christian poems which depict the career of a saint or holy woman. Chapter V is devoted to the two love lyrics, and Chapter VI to the passages from Genesis B and Christ I. In arranging the chapters in this way, I follow a development from a sketchy
presentation of women, very much indebted to traditional Germanic conventions, to a more extended presentation, as evinced in the succeeding chapters. Also, there is a movement towards greater individuality, noticeable especially in Chapters V and VI. The Conclusion defines the pattern established and suggests its implications. The reasons for originality in female characterisation are here set forth, and the question of a chronological development in female characterisation is discussed. Finally, this development in Old English poetry is related to wider trends developing in European literature. But, to begin with, the scope of this study should be defined a little more precisely, both with reference to previous scholarship, and to the connections that might be made beyond the limits of Old English poetry.

The volume of criticism devoted to female characterisation in Old English poetry is very small, and, as far as I have been able to discover, no work has focussed specifically on the subject of my own investigation: an explanation of the greater originality to be found in the creation of female, as opposed to male, characters. The works that have been written on women in an Anglo-Saxon context have more frequently been historical than literary in approach. Thus, in the first chapter of her book, The English Woman in History, Doris Mary Stenton stresses the independence of the Anglo-Saxon woman, which she later contrasts with the subordinate position of the woman in
post-Conquest England. George Forrest Browne, in "The Importance of Women in Anglo-Saxon Times,"\(^3\) describes the prominent women associated with the Christianisation of England, and with the double monasteries in the seventh and eighth centuries. Other studies, such as F. T. Wainwright's "Æthelflæd, Lady of the Mercians,"\(^4\) and Miles W. Campbell's "Queen Emma and Ælfgifu of Northampton: Canute the Great's Women,"\(^5\) have been devoted to individual women who influenced the secular course of Anglo-Saxon history. A recent study which combines the specific and the general approach is Carole Elizabeth Moore's "Queen Emma and the Role of Women in Anglo-Saxon Society."\(^6\) Moore regards Emma as epitomising the influential position of women in Anglo-Saxon society, a position which she finds distinctively Germanic and non-Christian in origin. The vindication of the Anglo-Saxon woman's independence which appears in all these works is a point of view which I shall find occasion to question in Chapter I.

Several studies have been concerned with social attitudes to women, rather than with historical women in themselves. Betty Bandel, in "The English Chroniclers' Attitude toward Women,"\(^7\) argues that in Anglo-Saxon times it was regarded as normal for women to take an active part in the organisation of society. A similar position is adopted by J. A. Crawford in "The Position of Women in Anglo-Saxon England."\(^8\) Crawford treats Old English poetry, along with the prose, as a direct record of social custom,
a procedure which I regard as very dangerous, in view of the highly stylised world of the poetry. However, this is an issue with which I shall deal more fully in Chapter I.

The assumption that Old English poetry is a direct indicator of social attitudes is even more pronounced in a recent article by Janet Buck, "Pre-Feudal Women." Buck, however, adopts a different stance from the previous writers in that she stresses the "social insufficiency" of pre-feudal women. Taking a feminist approach, Buck sees in Beowulf a record of male warrior "bonding," which excludes women. She argues that society should eliminate this kind of "bonding," which she believes is still prevalent.

In a much earlier work, the monograph Die Familie bei den Angelsachsen. Erster Hauptteil: Mann und Frau, Fritz Roeder also takes a different tack from most writers on Anglo-Saxon social institutions, and stresses the dependency of Anglo-Saxon women. Although Roeder's study is entitled "Mann und Frau," his focus is upon women: in their relation to their husbands, and in their social position more generally. He proposed to extend his study of the Anglo-Saxon family by the addition of a second "Hauptteil" on the children, but this part appears never to have been written. In the range and detail of the evidence considered (legal, historical, philological, etc.), Roeder's investigation is by far the most impressive of the works currently under discussion. However, Roeder's elaborate reconstruction of Anglo-Saxon custom builds too
confidently on fragmentary and doubtful evidence, and his assumption that the poetry of the Anglo-Saxon period can be used as a straightforward social record is highly questionable.\textsuperscript{12}

A work similar in scope to the larger study proposed, but not completed, by Roeder, is Anton Serota's "The Family in Old English Literature."\textsuperscript{13} Serota is interested in the contribution of Christianity to the development of family life, and argues that the effect of Christianity was to ennoble the family bonds which had become weakened before the Conversion. However, as I shall demonstrate in Chapter I, the Christian influence was not entirely a positive one in this regard, especially with reference to the position of women in family relationships. Moreover, Serota's study is superficial in its analysis and tendentious in its inferences, and involves some rather sweeping assumptions about what Anglo-Saxon England was actually like in the (largely undocumented) period before the Conversion.

While the number of works devoted to the historical position of Anglo-Saxon women has been few, the range of works specifically concerned with the literary treatment of women is even smaller. The reader will have noticed that three of the studies already mentioned were unpublished theses. In the area of female characterisation, not merely a proportion, but the entire body of material I have been able to find (apart from scattered references in works on other topics) has been contained in theses, mainly
unpublished. At worst, these studies have done no more than present a catalogue of the different kinds of women who appear here and there: B. M. Walker's "The Portrayal of Woman in Anglo-Saxon Literature"\textsuperscript{14} is a survey of this type. Somewhat more definite in its conclusions (though heavily indebted—and much inferior—to Roeder) is Ada Broch's "Die Stellung der Frau in der angelsächsischen Poesie."\textsuperscript{15} Broch laments the fact that so much of the poetry has to do with aristocratic women, and finds the portrayal of such women in the traditional Germanic poetry disappointingly idealized and unconvincing. She finds more convincing and lively the women in the Old Testament poems (\textit{Genesis} and \textit{Judith}), and the humbler women in the Riddles and Gnomes. However, no real thesis emerges from her analysis. Also, as we shall see, the categories defined by her are rather different from those which I discern among the female characters of Old English poetry.

One or two studies have been directed, not towards female characterisation in the poetry as a whole, but towards more limited aspects of the subject. Harriet Seaton, in a dissertation on "Marian Images in the Old English Writings,"\textsuperscript{16} catalogues the images for Mary—some typological and some not—to be found in Old English prose and verse. She uses the relation of Mary's faith to her virgin-motherhood and of the latter to the Church and the Christian, as 'keys' in interpreting these images. Seaton's work contains copious quotations from Old English and from
the Latin parallels, but the actual analysis of the imagery is minimal, and no clear thesis emerges from the whole. A much shorter, but much more decisive, study is Nancy Gortz Rose's dissertation on "The Old English Judith: The Problem of Leadership." Rose sees the poem as a study in leadership pointing the contrast between the good leader, Judith, and the bad leader, Holofernes.

Thus, works on the treatment of women in Old English poetry have been few, and have tended to treat the poetry as a sociological record. Of the very slight number concerned with specifically literary, rather than historical, evaluation, all have been either superficial and indecisive or strictly limited in scope. No study has isolated any particular tendency discernible from female characterisation in Old English poetry as a whole, as the present thesis aims to do.

The reader may be tempted to ask why this investigation restricts itself specifically to Old English poetry, rather than treating Old English literature as a whole, as several of the studies mentioned above have done. However, Old English poetry is a very sharply defined area, with conventions of its own, quite different from those obtaining in the prose. Whereas the poetry of the Anglo-Saxons is a conscious art form, a vast body of Old English prose has no pretensions to artistry: the laws, wills, and charters are strictly utilitarian. This is true to a large extent even of The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle.
There is a large amount of homiletic prose, some of which, notably the works of Wulfstan and, especially, Ælfric, is indeed artistic, but still the functional purpose of Old English prose, its aim at instruction rather than delight, is definitely to the fore. Much of the poetry is devotional too, but it is convenient to draw a line between the rather precious atmosphere of the verse, associated with a tradition of courtly entertainment, and the more practical prose. Further, a very great deal of Old English narrative prose relies on translating Latin originals. Use of foreign sources, mainly Latin, is also common in the poetry, but less so, and the influence of the native art form is conspicuous even in translated works.

In fact, an essential part of my method in this study is to make a sharp distinction between Old English prose and verse. The former, because of its practical nature, I regard as a much better guide to the actual customs of the Anglo-Saxon period. Hence, in Chapter I, Old English prose, along with Anglo-Latin writings, is used as a 'control,' in an attempt to establish a historical background against which the poetry can be judged.

Nevertheless in considering female characterisation in the poetry, it will be natural to make comparisons with the treatment of women in Old English prose. Here a distinction will be made between historical women, mentioned, for instance, in the Chronicle and in Bede's Ecclesiastical History, and 'literary women,' such as the
women in Ælfric's homilies and the heroine of the (unique) Old English prose romance, Apollonius of Tyre. The former will belong to the 'control' established in Chapter I. With regard to the latter category, it will be seen that the kind of development posited for the poetry, i.e., the treatment of female characters with a greater degree of originality, is less in evidence. The prose works are less free; they show a closer dependence on their Latin sources.

In addition to its links with Old English prose, the poetry suggests occasional more far-reaching comparisons, with foreign literatures. Bearing this circumstance in mind, I believe it will be helpful at this point to establish certain broad categories within which comparisons can be made. The overall significance of these comparisons will be discussed in the Conclusion.

The most obvious category for comparison is the literature of the other Germanic peoples, but reservations have to be made, for most other Germanic literature is two hundred years later, or more. It has been a common tendency to draw conclusions about things Germanic in Old English literature on the basis of features to be found in later Germanic literature, especially Old Icelandic. Statements made in the present thesis about Germanic characteristics in Old English poetry are not necessarily intended to imply that these characteristics are shared by Old Icelandic and Middle High German, merely that they stem from a native, as distinct from a Latin, Christian
tradition. Nevertheless, comparisons will be made with the later Germanic literature, especially that of medieval Iceland. In the Iceland, especially, women characters are highly developed and play a prominent part, although, as we shall see, they are significantly different from the female characters in Old English poetry. Contemporary Germanic literature offers one important comparison: the Old Saxon Genesis, on which the Old English Genesis B is based. The remaining Old Saxon and Old High German poetry, notably the Heliand and the Hildebrandslied, respectively, contains little that bears on female characterisation.

The main area from which close comparisons can be drawn is not Germanic, but Latin literature, and, in particular, the religious Latin works upon which much of the poetry under consideration is based, either directly or indirectly. Latin sources lie behind all of the works dealt with in Chapter IV: Elene, Juliana, and Judith, the first two, saints' lives, and the third, a work in the same tradition. Elene and Juliana are adapted from Latin prose vitae, and Judith from the Book of Judith in the Vulgate Bible. The Latin antiphons of the liturgy provide the framework of Christ I, and the scene between Joseph and Mary in that poem is indebted to a tradition of Latin homiletic dialogues. In assessing the degree of originality to be found in the Old English characterisation, it will be essential to establish the differences between the poems
and the Latin works which have inspired or influenced them.

A further area of comparison lies in the treatment of women in early Middle English literature. The closest resemblance is in the homiletic prose, which continues the tradition to be found in the Old English prose homilies: most conspicuously, the alliterative, rhythmic style, growing from the same roots of oral tradition as Old English poetry. However, the treatment of character in the Middle English homilies is markedly different from that in the Old English poems on similar subjects. The chief comparison to be made here is between the 'saint's life' poems and the late twelfth-century homiletic works known as the "Katherine Group" (named after the Life of St. Katherine of Alexandria included in their number). In particular, Juliana invites comparison with the Liflade ant te Passiun of Seinte Juliene in this group.

The categories mentioned so far have been linguistic and cultural. Although these provide convenient groupings, a more fundamental classification, as regards concepts of characterisation, is that provided by genre. The points of resemblance to or departure from other medieval literatures can be made with reference to the major contemporary genres: homiletic works, including sermons and saints' lives, heroic poetry, proverbial or gnomic poetry, romance, drama, lyric. The first two categories--homilies and vitae--are of Latin, Christian origin. The third and fourth are more widespread, but in
this thesis will chiefly involve comparisons with Germanic works, such as the Eddic poetry of Iceland and the Middle High German Nibelungenlied. *Beowulf* can be compared with the *Aeneid*, although this takes us beyond the range of medieval literature and direct relationships, and an incidental, though illuminating comparison can be made between *Genesis B* and *Paradise Lost*. The Old English heroic fragment, *Waldere* suggests comparison with the tenth-century Latin poem on the same subject, *Waltharius*. The latter is rather an unusual work, being an epic in the Virgilian manner using material drawn from Germanic legend.

*Waltharius* and the *Nibelungenlied*, though probably to be classified as epic, also partake of the quality of romance. Here we come to a very prolific medieval genre, embracing works of widely varying kinds. On the one hand, the treatment of women in Old English poetry occasionally suggests a resemblance with the romance of Hellenistic origin. The violent fluctuations of fortune and savage persecutions undergone by Juliana have something in common with the career of the protagonist in the Hellenistic romance, who, typically, suffers a long series of wild vicissitudes of fortune before finally emerging triumphant (although not, of course, in martyrdom). The tale of Apollonius, of which there is a version in Old English prose, belongs to this type of romance. At the other extreme, lie the courtly romances of the high Middle Ages. In the works of Chrétien de Troyes, for instance, character
relationships are presented with considerable subtlety.

Although the drama is a major medieval genre, its flowering did not take place until well after the Old English period. However, there are distinctly dramatic elements in Division VII of Christ I and in Genesis B. These can be compared with the religious drama of the Middle Ages: the Latin miracle play, and, to a lesser extent, with the later vernacular drama. Rosemary Woolf has compared Genesis B with the Anglo-Norman Mystère d'Adam. Another point of comparison with the Old English works, striking because it too is markedly earlier than the general development of medieval drama, is the set of saints' plays produced by the tenth-century German nun, Hrotsvitha.

The final category of comparison to be mentioned here is the lyric. The relationship between the two Old English love poems and the widespread genre of the Frauenlied has been discussed by Kemp Malone, while a narrower relationship between the two Old English works and the Frauenlieder among the Cambridge Songs, a collection of tenth- and early eleventh-century Latin lyrics, has been suggested by Clifford Davidson. Wulf and Eadwacer and The Wife's Lament can be related to love-laments uttered by women which appear in a variety of literatures, including Arabic and Indian. The type is probably universal, but it will be sufficient for my purposes to draw comparisons with other medieval European treatments. The relationship of the Old English 'women's songs' to works of the same
genre in Medieval Latin and early Celtic literature will be mentioned in Chapter V, and also a comparison made between the two Old English lyrics and medieval love poems more generally, from bawdy songs to lyrics and lays of courtly love. As we shall see, the Old English poems, though just as intense, are less obviously erotic and less sensuous than their better known counterparts of continental origin, both in Latin and in the vernacular tongues.

In the course of the following thesis, it will be seen that the classes into which I have divided the Old English poems correspond to wider categories in European literature, whether the relationship is due to borrowing or to parallel development of cultures at a similar stage of evolution. The poems treated in Chapter III—the Riddles, gnomic poems, Waldere, and Beowulf, all belong to an ancient, Germanic, ultimately pagan tradition of oral poetry. The 'saints' poems' in Chapter IV are derived from Latin vitae, and also have affinities with the romance, a genre of Mediterranean origin. The lyrics of Chapter V represent a genre little evidenced in Old English, but with analogues in Medieval Latin, and later, in the vernaculars. Finally, the passages from Genesis B and Christ I are dramatic in nature, and to be related to the emergent religious drama of the Middle Ages, seen first in Latin and subsequently in other languages.

Although this study is focussed on Old English poetry, and indeed, on that rather small body of poetry in
which women characters play a significant part, in order to assess the originality present in the creation of women characters, I shall take into account the broader factors to which the treatment in Old English poetry is related. The sociological basis for the literary development will emerge from Chapter I, and I shall show later in the thesis that there is an intimate relationship between the literary portrayal of women and their actual social position in Anglo-Saxon England, although the former is not simply the mirror image of the latter. The wider literary implications of the pattern seen in Old English poetry cannot be dealt with extensively within the rather limited scope of this study. However, I hope to give some indication that the development traced in Old English poetry is not an isolated phenomenon, but has discernible links with other European literature, and, hence, has ramifications that go far beyond the spatial and temporal boundaries of Anglo-Saxon England.
Footnotes

1 In Chapter V, which focusses on these two poems, I shall deal fully with the doubts raised as to whether these are, as most commonly accepted, love poems with female speakers.


3 In The Importance of Women in Anglo-Saxon Times; The Cultus of St. Peter and St. Paul; and Other Addresses, SPCK Studies in Church History (London, 1919), pp. 11-39.


7 Journal of the History of Ideas, 16 (1955), 113-18.


10 Studien zur englischen Philologie, ed. Lorenz Morsbach, 4 (Halle, 1899).

11 See Vorwort, pp. vii-ix.

12 Roeder notes that the picture presented in the poetry is different, for instance, from that which emerges from the laws, but still believes that the poetry can be used as 'evidence' in the same way as the laws. See pp. 5-6.


15 Zurich, 1902 (published dissertation).


18 A direct relationship is posited by T. B. Haber, A Comparative Study of Beowulf and the Aeneid (Princeton,
1931), but most scholars would go no further than to suggest a rather general influence, if any.

19 It is very unlikely that Milton was actually influenced by *Genesis B*. This issue will be dealt with in Chapter VI.


23 See Davidson, p. 453.
CHAPTER I

THE SOCIAL STATUS OF WOMEN IN
ANGLO-SAXON ENGLAND

Since the presentation of women characters in Anglo-Saxon poetry must bear a relation to the social realities of the period, the object of the present chapter will be to establish those realities in order that the precise nature of the poetic presentation, in its relation to the historical background, can subsequently be defined. In this chapter, I shall examine contemporary evidence in order to demonstrate what the social position of Anglo-Saxon women was. 'Evidence' here means mainly literary, but non-poetic, material: legal, historical, and hagiographic works. The exact relation of historical fact to poetic creation will only appear later on, for poetry does not simply reproduce historical fact, but responds to it in some way. As Dorothy Whitelock has pointed out, the two spheres of history and poetry cannot simply be used as mutual sources of information, on the assumption that what holds good for one also holds good for the other. The long span of the Anglo-Saxon period and the uncertainty in dating Old English poems make it difficult to relate specific works to particular historical events. Also, Old
English poetry, which mainly depicts the heroic world of the comitatus, tends to be limited and retrospective in its reflection of society. All these factors must be borne in mind when considering the relationship between the poetry and the historical conditions of the period from which it stems.

Anglo-Saxon custom and opinion with regard to women must be reconstructed from sources of various kinds. Some of these are in Old English, some in Latin; but, for the purposes of the present chapter, the language of the source is immaterial. A valuable fund of information is provided by the laws of various kings, in which contemporary custom can be inferred from the regulations and restrictions imposed on conduct. There are also evidential, as opposed to prescriptive, legal documents: records of various legal transactions, which frequently shed light on the position of women. Some evidence of the contemporary climate of opinion is provided by the penitential literature. The penitentials, manuals to guide priests in the administration of penances, occupy an unofficial position in the literature of the Church, but were widely used, and reflect attitudes held in certain ecclesiastical quarters. The annals of the period, notably the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, from time to time make mention of prominent women. Biography in the Anglo-Saxon period, even when it relates to secular persons, is very much influenced by the hagiographic tradition. The vita is, by and large, the medium which comes closest to
connected history, but since the aim of hagiography is the promotion of the faith, rather than the preservation of fact, biography at this period tends to miracle and eulogy rather than objective detail. Nevertheless, the Latin prose lives of Anglo-Saxons are relatively sober, often very circumstantial, and can be most illuminating. Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*, which incorporates material from both annals and saints' lives, is unique in giving us something close to the modern notion of 'history'—but even Bede does not, by modern standards, provide objective accuracy. Finally, there are a number of Latin letters which give some incidental light on the position of women. Apart from these written sources, of various sorts, we have only scattered data, such as that provided by place-names and archaeological finds. In discussing the information to be gleaned from the various sources, I aim to show what general conclusions can be drawn for the Anglo-Saxon period as a whole, what evidence there is of significant change in the position of women during this period, and what difference exists between Anglo-Saxon and Norman times.

It is the prevailing opinion that women in the Anglo-Saxon period had a much more advantageous position in society than they held in the later Middle Ages. In particular, scholars have cited the position of women with regard to litigation, property-holding, and inheritance, and have argued that the Anglo-Saxon woman could appear in court and testify or conduct a suit, could hold property in
her own right, and could inherit or bequeath it, in contrast to the women of Norman times and later, for whom these privileges were curtailed. The evidence on which these statements are based, chiefly wills and lawsuits, is all late in the period, which makes its validity for the Anglo-Saxon period as a whole somewhat suspect. Moreover, there is no agreement as to when the supposed post-Conquest change in women's status took place or how it manifested itself. Florence Buckstaff is of the opinion that the change after the Conquest was a gradual one, and stresses that the queens of William I and Henry I had considerable authority and independence. On the other hand, Betty Bandel points a sharp contrast between the matter-of-fact presentation of Æthelflæd's military campaigns in the Abingdon Chronicle and the criticism of the aggressive Matilda in the chronicles of the twelfth century. Doris Stenton also sees a sharp drop in women's status after the Conquest, and believes that Magna Carta marked the beginning of a returning upward trend. All of these writers are influenced by their desire to stress the depressed position of women in feudal times, a position which appears more striking if it can be contrasted with the situation of women in the Anglo-Saxon era.

In assessing the historical evidence, it will be convenient to consider the various kinds of texts in turn. I begin with the 'prescriptive' legal documents, i.e., the laws. The character of the Anglo-Saxon law-codes suggests
that they were not intended to constitute a complete statement of the law, but to regulate and modify a pre-existing body of custom. In his *History of English Law*, William Holdsworth observes:

> These codes, like the Leges Barbarorum of the continent, enacted the customary law of the tribe. . . . They take for granted a mass of unwritten custom, the contents of which can only be guessed at from incidental hints, from foreign analogies and from later survivals.¹¹

The Anglo-Saxon laws consist of terse and often mystifying regulations, largely stating the compensations payable for various kinds of theft and injury. The circumstances to which each regulation applies are not described fully, but merely alluded to, as if they were already known. Much remains unstated, and much has to be inferred.

The laws in general are concerned with the bulk of the population, which means that they apply with most frequency to members of the *ceorlisc* class. However, they reflect very clearly the division of Anglo-Saxon society into well marked layers. The major division is between the aristocrat (the *eorlcund* or *gesicund* man) and the *ceorl*. Beneath these two classes is the further class of slaves.¹² In the Anglo-Saxon laws, a man's worth is reckoned according to his class. Thus, the nobleman has a wergild of 1200 shillings, the *ceorl* of 200 shillings (in Kent, where the shilling had a higher value, the amounts are 300 and 100 respectively). Sometimes an intermediate class of men with a wergild of 600 shillings is referred
to. Just as the nobleman's wergild is six times the value of the ceorl's, the former's oath has six times the authority of the latter's. Still higher values are placed on the wergild or oath of the higher clergy and state officials, with the king ranking highest of all.\textsuperscript{13}

The laws pertaining specifically to women are conceived in the light of this stratification. Most of these laws have to do with the sexual violation of women. The gravity of the offence is reckoned in proportion to the rank of the woman's guardian: her master, husband, or father. Thus, in the Laws of Ethelbert of Kent (c. 600) 50 shillings compensation is payable for violation of a female slave belonging to the king, 12 shillings for violation of the slave of an eorl, and 6 shillings for commission of the same offence with the slave of a ceorl.\textsuperscript{14} In the Laws of Alfred (871-99), there is a similar gradation of penalties payable for sexual interference with the wife of a twelfhynd man, a syxhynd man, and a ceorlisc man, respectively.\textsuperscript{15} Sexual relations with a betrothed woman are punishable by fines determined by her father's rank.\textsuperscript{16} Abduction of a nun from a monastery is punishable by the same fine, 120 shillings, payable for illicit sexual relations with a twelfhynd woman either married or betrothed.\textsuperscript{17} And molestation of a nun, i.e., seizing her by her clothing or her breast, is to be compensated at double the rate for a lay person.\textsuperscript{18} Alfred here seems to refer to a ceorlisc woman, since the penalties
for various kinds of molestation of a woman of this class are set out a little earlier in the law code. All these fines are payable to the injured party, who in all cases is the woman's guardian: her master if she is a slave, her husband if she is married, and her father or male relative if she is betrothed. If the woman is a nun, her guardianship is shared. The fine to be exacted for abduction of a nun is to be paid "healf cyninge, healf biscepe 7 þære cirican hlaforde, þe þone munuc [more probably, 'myncynne' or 'nunnan'] age." It is noteworthy that in all these examples the offence and the guilt do not attach primarily to the woman. She is the vehicle, rather than either the offending or the injured party.

The statements of the law codes regarding the position of women in marriage do not make distinctions between the classes, but seem to be directed chiefly towards the ceorlisc class. The word ceorl appears frequently, sometimes merely meaning 'husband,' but often meaning a man of the lower free class. A law of Ine regulating the administration of a fatherless child's property refers to the frumstol, which suggests a piece of land, but the mention of providing a cow for it in summer and an ox in winter indicates the kind of small property that would support a single family. In Cnut's Laws, the question of the degree of a woman's independence from her husband is raised with reference to a ceorl's cot and the objects over which his wife has charge.
details, again, suggest a small, self-supporting household. Since the laws make no statement of a different kind of relationship between wives and husbands of higher or lower class, we may take it that their application is general; but, nevertheless, their preoccupation with the ceorlisc class should be borne in mind. 25

As we have seen, there is, underlying the social stratification evident in these laws, a general assumption that the woman is only the vehicle in these offences, and not one of the main parties concerned. The view of woman as object implied here is particularly marked in the earliest (written) code of laws, those of Ethelbert. The Laws of Ethelbert regard a woman merely as a rather valuable piece of property. They speak, for instance, of buying a wife:

\[ Gif \ mon \ maegp \ gebigeð, \ ceapi \ geceapod \ sy, \ gif \ hit \ unfacne \ is. \]
\[ Gif \ hit \ þonne \ facne \ is, \ ef[t] \ þær \ æt \ ham \ gebrenge,7 \ him \ man \ his \ scæt \ ægefe.26 \]

Another clause speaks of taking a maiden away by force from her 'owner' (agende). 27 An earlier section in the same laws shows that a wife was thought of as a replaceable item:

\[ Gif \ friman \ wið \ fries \ mannes \ wif \ geligeþ, \ his \ wergelde \ abicge \ 7 \ oðer \ wif \ his \ agenum \ scætte \ begete \ 7 \ ðæm \ oðrum \ æt \ þam \ [ham?] \ gebrenge.28 \]

The Laws of Ine of Wessex, which date from between 688 and 694, speak of buying a wife as a bargain of much the same kind:
The early Anglo-Saxon view of marriage as a bargain between the bridegroom and the bride's relatives, notably her guardian, was stressed by Fritz Roeder in his monograph Die Familie bei den Angelsachsen:

... sie [the bride] kann ihre Sache nicht selbst führen, da sie nicht befugt ist, in eigener Person Rechtsgeschäfte abzuschliessen, sondern Fürsprecher bedarf, ... An ihrer Spitze steht das Familienoberhaupt, das jedesmal der rechtliche Verlober des Mädchens ist, weil in seiner Hand die Geschlechtsmundschaft ruht; daher heisst er auch Ædelb's Ges. 82 ... sē ægende ... und zwar "der Vormundschaft über die Jungfrau," dessen Einwilligung zur Ehe man durch den Brautschatz erkaufen muss.30

The later laws do not speak specifically of buying a wife, but there is still no sense of marriage as an equal partnership. In the matter of marital fidelity, there is a marked discrimination against women. The Laws of Cnut (1020-23) assign a brutal punishment for a wife's infidelity:

Gif be cwicum ceorle wif hi be ðœrum were forlicge, 7 hit open weorðe, geweorðe heo to woruldsceame syðdan hyre sylfre, 7 hæbbe se rihtwer eall þæt heo ahte; 7 heo þolig þæt heo ahte.31

In contrast, a husband's infidelity is punishable by fine in serious cases (incest can be punished by forfeit of property), and merely by religious penance in minor cases (i.e., adultery with a slave or a concubine).³² Thus, male adultery is certainly regarded as morally reprehensible, but is treated much less harshly.33
The degree to which a wife is regarded as an independent being or merely an appendage of her husband is indicated in the laws which deal with a wife's complicity in her husband's offences. The Laws of Ine and Cnut deal with the problem of bringing home stolen goods (meat).

The relevant section of Ine's Laws states:

Gif ceorl ceap forstilg 7 bireō into his ærne, 7 befehð þærinne mon, þonne bið se his dæl synnig butan þam wife anum, forðon hio sceal hire ealdore hieran: gif hio dear mid aðe gecyðan, þæt hio þæs forstolenan ne onbite, nime hire driddan sceat.34

Cnut's Laws make the following provisions:

And gyf hweylc man forstolen þinge ham to his cotan bringe 7 he arasod wurðe, riht is, þæt he hæbbe þæt he æftereode. 7 butan hit under þæs wifes cæglocan gebroht ware, si heo clæne. Ac þære cægean heo sceal weardian, þæt is hyre hordern 7 hyre cyste 7 hyre tege: gyf hit under þyssa ænigum gebroht byð, þonne byð heo scealdig. 7 ne mæg nan wif hyre bondan forbeodan, þæt he ne mote into his coton gelogian þæt þæt he wylle.35

The later laws proceed from the same premise as the earlier ones: that a wife is subordinate to her husband. This means that she has no power to gainsay him, even when he is committing a crime. But in Cnut's Laws there is an emphasis on the wife's authority over at least a part of the house.

Roeder points out that there is a strong resemblance between the position of a wife in relation to her husband and that of a thane in relation to his lord:

In beiden Lebensverhältnissen ist die eine Partei zum Schutz und Unterhalt der anderen, diese dagegen zu völliger, persönlicher Hingabe, ohne dass für sie etwas Drückendes oder gar Herabsetzendes in ihrer Unterordnung läge, verpflichtet.36
Roeder supports this statement by an interesting comparison between the late Old English (c. 1000) document known as *Be Wifmannes Beweddunge* and the thane's oath of allegiance to his lord. Roeder notes that just as in the former the wife's acceptance of her suitor is expressed by the term "willan geceosan," the same formal term is used in the thane's oath. Similarly, the thane pledges allegiance to his lord on condition that "he me healde, swa ic earnian wille," whereas in *Be Wifmannes Beweddunge*, the bridegroom must pledge "&et he hy æfter Godes riht healdan wille, swa wer his wif sceal." I quote the thane's oath as reproduced by Roeder:

\[\text{Thus man sceal swerigean hyld-āðas.}\]
\[\text{On ðone Drihten þe þes hāligdōm is fore hālig, ic wille beon N. hold and getrīwe, and eal lufian þæt hē lūfað, and eal ǎscunian þæt hē āscunāð, æfter Godes rihte and æfter Worold gerysnum, and næfre willes ne gewealdes, wordes ne weorces, ðwiht dōn, þæs him laðre bið, wið þam, þē hē mē healde, swā ic earnian wille, and eall þæt læste, þæt uncer formǣl wæs, þā ic to him gebeah and his willan geceās.}\]

Thus, the husband's status with regard to his wife is one of guardianship, but her position is not one of servitude. To a certain extent, too, the wife remains in the guardianship of her blood kin, who retain responsibility for her in specific cases, notably of crimes committed either by her or against her. This issue is raised in *Be Wifmannes Beweddunge*:

\[\text{Gif hy man þonne ut of lande lædan wille on cōres þegnes land, þonne bið hire rād, þæt frynd þa forword habban, þæt hire man nan woh to ne do, and gif heo gylt gewyrce, þæt hy moton beon bote nyst, gif heo næfo of hwam heo bete.}\]
Another piece of evidence cited by Roeder in this context is found in the Laws of Henry I. This compilation is largely based on pre-Conquest material, but, obviously, its date makes it unreliable as an indication of Anglo-Saxon custom. Roeder quotes the *Leges Henrici*, 70, sec. 12, which states that if a woman commits homicide the responsibility lies with herself, her offspring, and her kin, but not with her husband.\(^3^9\) Taken in conjunction with the passage from *Be Wifmannes Beweddunge*, this clause is significant.\(^4^0\)

The fact that the wife remains to a certain extent a member of her own kin group does not in itself indicate any degree of autonomy on her part, but it does suggest that her husband's guardianship over her is qualified in certain ways. An area in which some authority is accorded to her in relation to her husband and their respective kin is that of charge of the children. The woman's rights in this respect were recognised from the earliest period. The Laws of Ethelbert make provision for the event of a separation between husband and wife (there is no mention of what the circumstances might be, but the separation appears to be an honourable one), and the wife has some choice in deciding whether the children shall accompany her:

\begin{verbatim}
Gif mid bearnum bugan wille, healfne scæt age.
Gif ceorl agan wile: swa an bearn [i.e., if the husband desires to have the children].\(^4^1\)
\end{verbatim}

The passage does not state whether the husband has the
final decision. Both the Laws of Hlothhere and Eadric of Kent (673-85?) and those of Ine stipulate that the child shall accompany its mother if the father dies. But evidently the mother is not considered capable of managing affairs herself, for it is stated that the paternal kin are to act as protectors and to be responsible for managing the property.  

In connection with the responsibilities of the kin group, it is interesting to note that the paternal kin has a more important place than the maternal. This emerges from the above laws governing the protection of fatherless children. It is also reflected in the responsibility of the kin to pay the wergild for one of their members, and to support him as oath-helpers. A clause in Alfred's Laws suggests that in normal circumstances the paternal kin paid two-thirds of the wergild and the maternal one-third. The same proportion occurs in a law of Æhelstan providing for two compurgators from the father's kin and one from the mother's. The relatives on the male side are preferred over relatives on the female side, but the latter have a definite place. This attitude undoubtedly has some correlation with society's view of the relative status of men and women generally, although in these cases the actual persons involved, whether maternal or paternal relatives, would all be male.

As regards property-holding and inheritance, the Anglo-Saxon laws do not give women a particularly
advantageous position. Most of the statements in the laws suggest a joint property of husband and wife, in which the wife has certain rights if she loses her husband by death or separation. The law of Cnut which sets the punishment for adultery refers to the wife's forfeiture of all her property to her husband, which suggests that she had some property of her own.\textsuperscript{45} Also, there are frequent references in Anglo-Saxon wills and other legal documents to settlement of property on women. But the indications are that during the husband's lifetime such property, aside from personal possessions, was administered by him.\textsuperscript{46}

It appears from the Laws of Ethelbert that a man's wife has rights in the joint property only by virtue of being the mother of his children. She is entitled to half the property if she is holding it on behalf of the children; having borne a child itself entitles her to some rights; if she has borne no children, she gets nothing:

\begin{verbatim}
Gif heo cwic bearn gebyrep, healfne scæt age, gif ceorl ær swyltelpe.
Gif mid bearnum bugan wille, healfne scæt age.
Gif ceorl agan wile: swa an bearn.
Gif heo bearn ne gebyrep, fæderingmagas fioh agan 7 morgengyfe.\textsuperscript{47}
\end{verbatim}

That she should lose her morning-gift is especially striking. This is the gift given by the husband to his wife on the morning after the wedding and intended for her especial use rather than as part of the joint property. In the case of wealthy women of the later period, the morning-gift was likely to take the form of a landed estate.\textsuperscript{48}
Cnut's Laws state, somewhat vaguely, that if a man dies intestate

\[
\text{. . . beo be his [the man's lord's] dihte seo æht gescyft swyðe rihte wife 7 cildum 7 nehamgum, ælcum be þære þe him to gebyrige.}^49
\]

Direct statements of the widow's portion are absent from the other laws, but the provision in the clause of Æthelbert quoted above that the wife of a thief shall, if not implicated, retain her "driddan sceat"^50 suggests that under West Saxon, as distinct from Kentish, law the widow was entitled to one-third of the joint property. None of the Anglo-Saxon codes gives any indication that the widow's right to inherit under the law was any stronger than that of the widow of feudal times, who was entitled to one-third of her husband's property, whether he made a will or not.\(^51\)

The early laws make no mention of a woman's choice in marriage, although it is not specifically stated that no choice is available to her. By the time of Cnut's Laws the woman's right of choice has become a well-established concept, and there is a sense of the impropriety of 'buying' a wife, which was taken for granted in Æthelbert's code:

\[
\text{7 na nyde man naðer ne wif ne mænden to þam, þe hyre sylfre mislicie, ne wìð sceatte ne sylle, butan he hwæt agenes ðances gyfan wylle.}^52
\]

On the whole, the later codes show an appreciation of female autonomy absent from the early laws, but there is still no indication of female equality. One of Æthelred's codes (that issued in 1008) makes certain provisions for widows which suggest that they are
under the general guardianship of the state, rather than
the immediate guardianship of their kin, and therefore in
a much freer, if potentially dangerous, position:

7 sy ælc wydewe, þe hy sylfe mid rihte gehealde,
on Godes griðe 7 on þæs cynges.53

The next clause imposes a certain restriction:

7 sitte ælc [wydewe] XII mona$ werleas; ceose
syðan þæt heo sylf wille.54

This mixture of liberalism tempered with severity
is also apparent in Cnut's Laws. The brutality of the
clause which punishes a wife's infidelity with mutilation
is probably to be attributed to the influence of
Scandinavian laws and a ruder system of justice.55 This
harshness contrasts sharply with the humanity of the clause
stressing a woman's rights in choosing a marriage partner.
Again, there is a rather qualified liberalism in Cnut's
version of Ethelred's law on the remarriage of widows. The
penalties for infringement of the twelve-month waiting
period are quite severe:

7 gif heo binnan geares fæce wer geceose, þonne
polige heo þære morgengyfe 7 ealra þæra æhta, þe
heo þurn ðerran wer hæfde; 7 fon þa nehstan frynd
to ðam lande 7 to þam æhtan, þe heo ær hæfde.56

However, there is one text, Be Wifmannes Beweddunge,
which, in comparison to the Anglo-Saxon laws as a whole,
gives a markedly favourable position to women. This work
is here grouped with the law-codes because, although it is
not strictly a set of laws, it is, like them, a prescriptive
legal document. Exactly what its legal authority was is not
clear, but its tenor suggests a statement of what is desirable rather than obligatory. The text outlines the formal procedure to be followed in the betrothal. Liebermann, in his edition of the Anglo-Saxon laws, is inclined to regard this work as late, between 970 and 1030, but this is mainly because it shows a liberalism towards women more characteristic of the later period.

The negotiations described in Be Wifmannes Beweddunge are much more advantageous to the woman than the stipulations set out in the law-codes, especially the early ones. The prospective husband is to make his suit only if it pleases the woman, as well as her kinsmen, and he is to pledge "bæt he on ða wisan hire geornige, ðet he hy æfter Godes riht healdan wille, swa wer his wif sceal." The bald ceap of Ethelbert's Laws has become a giving of recompense for rearing the bride ("œæt fosterlean"), and there is an additional payment made to her personally by the bridegroom for accepting him ("wið þam ðet heo his willan gæceose"). If she outlives him, "þonne is riht, ðæt heo sy healfe yres wyrde--7 ealles, gif hy cild gemæne habban--, bute heo eft wær ceose."61

The Anglo-Saxon laws involving women are confined to the area of marriage and sexual offences. The bulk of the laws, dealing with the penalties for various crimes and the organisation of trade and commerce, suggest an entirely male world of affairs. The early laws make it clear that a woman passes from the guardianship of one man
to that of another. A woman's choice in determining the manner of her life is limited to the option, not, apparently, allowed her in the earliest period, of refusing the husband chosen for her. By the latest period, i.e., after about 1000, there is some suggestion that the widow may remain independent: she can choose "þæt heo sylf wylle." But there is an indication that the usual alternative to marriage is the religious life, rather than an independent position in the world. One of Cnut's laws states: "7 na hadige man æfre wuduwan to hrædlice" (i.e., "do not too quickly make a widow a nun"), which suggests considerable pressure in that direction, from the family, or the Church, or both.

Apart from the laws, certain other legal documents shed light on the social position of women. These documents comprise charters, writs, marriage contracts, lawsuits, and wills. The first two categories are of such a nature that the only information they offer to the present purpose is in the form of names. Thus, charters add to the evidence of chronicles and other records by mentioning royal women as abbesses in charge of monasteries in the seventh, eighth, and early ninth centuries. Also, kings' wives, and more rarely other members of the royal family, occasionally appear among the eminent men of the kingdom as witnesses to charters. This is contributing evidence that women of the highest rank took some part in public affairs.
The other kinds of legal records are more fruitful. Two late Anglo-Saxon marriage contracts are particularly interesting. Both date from the first quarter of the eleventh century, both are short, consisting of only two or three paragraphs, and both are chiefly noteworthy for their record of land settlements. Clearly, the persons involved are of high rank. The women endowed by these settlements receive much better provision than that stipulated in the laws, and somewhat better even than that indicated in Be Wifmannes Beweddunge. In one of these marriage contracts, that between Wulfric and Archbishop Wulfstan's sister, the lady is given an estate to dispose of as she pleases, in addition to other land and substantial gifts. In the other contract, the Kentish marriage agreement, the lady fares even better. She receives immediate endowments of a very plentiful kind, and also the agreement is made that whichever of the couple lives the longer shall succeed to the whole property.

There are two lawsuits in which women play a prominent part: one records a dispute between a certain Wynflæð and Leofwine, the other a dispute between a mother and son. In her edition of these documents, Agnes Robertson suggests a date between 990 and 992 for the first, between 1016 and 1035 for the second. Both disputes concern the ownership of land. In the case of Wynflæð, a woman appears on her own behalf in court and produces witnesses to support her. These include persons of very high rank,
both men and women. Wynflæd was attempting to recover an estate seized from her by Leofwine. She fought her own case—and apparently won it. In the other case, a woman vindicates her right to disinherit her own son when bequeathing her land. These documents indicate that, in these two lawsuits at least, women were able to secure their rights with vigour and independence. The fact that there is no mention of a husband in either case makes it likely that these women were widows, and thus freer to act for themselves. It should be noted that the unnamed woman who cut her son out of her will did not actually go to court herself; the officials came to visit her. Moreover, the prominence of Thurkill the White in the account, and the fact that his wife was the beneficiary in the contested will, make it likely that Thurkill was a powerful man in the district, and this may have had something to do with the outcome of the case.

The case of Wynflæd is the major piece of evidence for the Anglo-Saxon woman's right to plead her own lawsuit. In the other case described, the woman made her defence out of court. There are other lawsuits in which women are prominently involved. An example is the dispute between Eadgifu, the wife (later the widow) of Edward the Elder, and a certain Goda, over the ownership of land. The record describes a dispute lasting many years and involving several appeals to the king and the witan. The dispute was finally settled in Eadgifu's favour in the reign of Edgar, her
grandson. The account does not specify whether or not Eadgifu actually appeared in court, but does refer to the intercession of Byrhisige Dyrincg and Eadgifu's friends. The case shows that Eadgifu held or claimed land in her own right, even during the lifetime of her husband, and that she pursued her claim with vigour and tenacity; but it looks as if, to some extent at least, she stood in the background, and needed the assistance of male friends and relatives to make her claim effective. Although she eventually won her case, she gave the land to the Church, which hints that pressure from ecclesiastical quarters had something to do with her final success. There is the same implication in the case of the widow of Ætheric of Boccing. She appealed to King Ethelred and the witan to let her husband's will stand; i.e., she wished that her husband, who had died in bad favour, should be rehabilitated. Her appeal was made through her forespeca, Archbishop Ælfric, and her suit was granted in consideration of her donating her morning-gift to the Church.

The above lawsuits all concern wealthy women who are also widows (Eadgifu was a widow through most of the duration of the dispute and at the final settlement). These women took an active part in conducting their affairs, and were not barred from appearing on their own behalf in court; but it seems to have been more likely that an influential male friend or relative would present the case to the judicial body: in these instances, the witan.
The Anglo-Saxon wills record the disposal of property, chiefly land, but also money and valuables, to various beneficiaries. These documents are the records of oral agreements, rather than wills in the strict modern sense, but this does not affect their value as evidence. Whitelock prints thirty-nine wills in her collection. Of these, ten are made by women, and four by husbands and wives jointly. By and large, the best provision is made for the eldest son, but younger sons and daughters are also provided with estates as well as valuables. The fact that no mention is made of a husband in the women's wills, unless in connection with his 'soul,' suggests that the testatrices are widows. Michael Sheehan, in his study of medieval wills, observes that women may occasionally have made wills in the lifetime of their husbands, but only with the consent of the latter. When husbands will estates to their wives, restrictions are usually placed on the widow's right to dispose of them, although occasionally she is allowed free disposal.

One will which is of especial interest is that of King Alfred. It is earlier than the wills described in the previous paragraph, and in a different style; its instructions are filled out with personal explanations and reflections in the Alfredian manner. Like the wills of lesser persons, the will of Alfred distributes estates and money among his sons, daughters, and other kin and friends. The more noteworthy section of the will in the present
connection is that in which Alfred asks the recipients of his bocland to pass it on to their sons and keep it "on þa wæpnedhealf" and not "on þa spinlhealf." He states that such has been the practice of his grandfather. This passage indicates a preference for male heirs. The words have the air of a special, but not a remarkable, request. It looks as if Alfred is trying to consolidate resources in male hands, very likely as a military precaution.

The wills and lawsuits, then, indicate that the principle of male primogeniture, which dominates the transmission of property in later times, has no overriding force in Anglo-Saxon inheritance. This freedom benefits not only wives and daughters, but also younger sons, and other interested persons. The evidence of the wills and lawsuits suggests that women from the wealthiest families had some independent property rights. This is especially true of widows. As the evidence is late, it may well be that in earlier times even widows of high rank did not have this freedom. It is significant that the late Anglo-Saxon laws also suggest a stronger position for widows than other women, whereas in the earliest laws widows continued to be subject to the guardianship (mund) of another person. The status of women in post-Conquest legislation resembles that in the late Anglo-Saxon law-codes, especially in the stronger position of widows relative to other women. Although the marriage contracts show that some wealthy Anglo-Saxon women were more
generously endowed by their husbands than feudal women were able to be, the Anglo-Saxon woman's degree of independence in her husband's lifetime was probably no greater than that of the woman of feudal times, who was subject to her husband's decisions, was represented by him in court, and could not dispose of her property without his consent. 79

I shall now turn to a different type of record, the penitentials. These documents have some affinities with the laws, in that both consist of regulations governing conduct and setting punishments. In certain cases, the penitentials, like the laws, grade offences according to the rank of the persons concerned. 80 However, the status of the penitentials is quite different from that of the laws. The penitentials, which constitute guidelines for the use of priests, do not necessarily represent official opinion or widespread custom. The various sets of penitential codes are associated with certain ecclesiastics: Finnian, Cummean, Theodore, etc., and are especially directed to the monastic life. Many of the offences described are those that would involve monks. For the Anglo-Saxon period, the most important penitential is that linked with the name of Theodore of Tarsus, who was sent to England as Archbishop of Canterbury in 669. This document purports to be the work of a certain "Discipulus Umbrensis" who compiled the pronouncements made by Theodore. 81 The Penitential of Theodore is particularly relevant to this study because it contains two sections
specifically concerned with marriage.

In general, the Penitential shows the same preferential treatment of the husband in the marital relationship as appeared in the laws. This emerges very clearly in those regulations which treat husband and wife quite differently in the same situation. Thus, Theodore's Penitential tells us, "Si cuius uxor fornicata fuerit licet dimittere eam et aliam accipere . . ." but "Mulieri non licet virum dimittere licet sit fornicator nisi pro monasterio" (i.e., she can only divorce her husband for adultery if she wishes to enter a monastery). Again: "Muliere mortua licet viro post mensem alteram accipere mortuo viro post annum licet mulieri alterum tollere [accipere?] virum." In these cases, the moral standard applied to the wife is much stricter. It is significant, however, that a woman is considered entitled to more generous treatment if she decides to enter a monastery. This bias also appears in a clause which allows a woman divorced for adultery to retain a quarter of her inheritance if she enters a monastery, but "si non vult nihil habeat." The austerity associated with the Church, and especially with monasticism, makes itself apparent in regulations which imply something unclean in the male-female relationship and in the physical nature of women. Thus, the Penitential imposes considerable restrictions on marital intercourse, and stipulates that after having intercourse with his wife a husband should wash before he
enters a church, and that a husband should not see his wife naked. Women are prohibited from entering a church "menstruo tempore" and after childbirth. Regulations like these represent an austerity of outlook which finds no counterpart in the secular sources.

However, in contrast to the anti-female bias of the previously mentioned clauses, certain passages in the Penitential show that in some respects the influence of the Church was a positive one. In particular, the tendency of the early laws to regard women as marriageable objects is countered by clauses in the Penitential which safeguard a woman's position in this regard. A girl of fourteen is to have "sui corporis potestatem"; at the age of sixteen or seventeen she may choose to enter a monastery if she wishes; and after this age, she is not to be married against her will. The Penitential's emphasis upon a woman's freedom of choice is earlier than anything comparable in the laws, and indicates that the Church had a liberalising influence in this respect, if only because of its interest in allowing women to become nuns. On the other hand, the sexual austerity and distaste for women which characterise the Penitential are not carried over into the secular writings, are uncharacteristic of Anglo-Saxon society as a whole, and are nowhere to be found in the poetry.

The other historical evidence for the period comes from narrative sources of various kinds. The chief contemporary record of Anglo-Saxon history is the Anglo-Saxon
Chronicle. Mention of women in the Chronicle is for the most part confined to members of royal families and women connected with the Church (it is known from other sources that these women were themselves usually royal). Thus, the Chronicle records the foundation of the monastery of Ely by St. Æthelthryth (Etheldreda) in 673, and her death in 679, and also the death of Hild, abbess of Whitby, in 680. There is an entry recording that Queen Seaxburh reigned for one year after the death of her husband, Cenwalh, in 672; under the year 697 it is noted that the Mercians slew Osthryth, Ethelred's queen; under 722 it is stated that Queen Æthelburh destroyed Taunton, which Ine (her husband) had built. These laconic entries suggest that royal women could sometimes be a power in their own right. However, mention of women as the moving forces behind important political events is rare. Very occasionally, women take a leading role in power politics, but there is never any mention of women of less than royal rank doing so. Female members of royal families evidently had a position of considerable formal prominence. The appearance of the names of queens on royal charters was mentioned earlier. The Peterborough version of the Chronicle describes in some detail the foundation of the abbey at Medeshamstede (Peterborough), and states that the sisters of King Wulfhere, along with his brother, were present at the ceremony of consecration and witnessed the foundation charter. The fact that royal women commonly
played a formal and official part in public affairs must have made it possible for them to turn their merely formal role into a more active one in certain circumstances. Such occasions, however, are mentioned very infrequently, except where women are involved in the founding and administration of monasteries.

There are three women in the Anglo-Saxon period whose part in secular political affairs is sufficiently conspicuous and well-documented to merit further attention. King Alfred's daughter Æthelflæd, who was married to Ethelred, Ealdorman of Mercia, ruled Mercia independently for several years after her husband's death. The Abingdon version of the Chronicle incorporates a set of Mercian annals (the Mercian Register) which gives an account of Æthelflæd's contribution to the campaign against the Danes.96 Evidently, Æthelflæd conducted a military campaign with as much authority and decision as her brother Edward (the Elder), King of the West Saxons, or her father Alfred. She built a series of forts, stormed certain towns, and secured the submission of others by the mere threat of her presence. No other woman in the Chronicle is described conducting affairs on equal terms with men in this way. Æthelflæd must have been a remarkable woman. However, she owed her position of power to the accidents of history: there seems to have been no male at the time who could command Mercian loyalty. After her death, her daughter Ælfwynn, who was obviously not
made of the same stuff, only survived for a few months as leader of the Mercians before Edward assumed complete control. 97

The other two notable women, known to us from the Chronicle, the Encomium Emmae Reginae, and other sources, are Ælfgifu of Northampton and Emma of Normandy, the mistress and wife respectively of King Cnut. Emma, although not herself an Anglo-Saxon, comes within the scope of this enquiry by being a queen of Anglo-Saxon England. She was first married to Ethelred the Unready, by whom she had two sons: Edward (the Confessor) and Alfred. They were sent to Normandy during the troubled reign of Ethelred, and were thereafter brought up at the Norman court. Cnut's relationship with Ælfgifu, which preceded his marriage, was a respectable liaison, "more Danico." He acknowledged his two sons by her, Swein and Harold Harefoot, and made Swein King of Norway under the regency of Ælfgifu. She ruled with such severity that her reign, "Ælfgifu's time," became a proverbial expression for a time of hardship. We gather, reading between the lines in the Chronicle, that when Cnut died in 1035, there was a struggle between Ælfgifu and Emma as to whether Harold Harefoot or Harthacnut, Emma's son should become king. 98 Harold was at first successful. He deprived Emma of the royal treasure and drove her into exile, but not before she had put up considerable resistance. The Chronicle states that Harold took "ealle þa betstan gærsuma þe heo ofhealdan ne
"mihte," but she "sæt þeh forð þær binnan [i.e., in the town of Winchester] ða hwile þe heo moste." Before she left, her son Alfred made his ill-fated visit to England which resulted in his murder by the followers of Earl Godwine. The Chronicle says Alfred came to visit his mother, but probably he was sounding out his brother Edward's chances in the political scene, a piece of manoeuvering in which Emma may well have had foreknowledge. Harold only reigned a short time before he died and was succeeded by Harthacnut, who himself died in 1042, whereupon Edward the Confessor succeeded. The Chronicle describes how after his accession Edward deprived his mother of all her wealth "forðam heo hit heold ær to fæste wið hine." It is clear that both Ælfgifu and Emma were influential women. Ælfgifu imposed a severe regime on Norway, and Emma exercised herself in the struggle over the succession after Cnut's death. The Chronicle's descriptions of her behaviour suggest that she too was a hard and tenacious woman. Also, the references to the treasure that she tried so hard to keep indicate that she lived with considerable independent state. Nevertheless, neither Ælfgifu nor Emma sought power in her own right. They aimed at wielding power through their sons, unlike Æthelflaed, who ruled the Mercians on her own behalf. Although Æthelflaed is exceptional, she has counterparts in other periods. Matilda is the obvious comparison from
the Norman era. She, along with Eleanor of Aquitaine, and other great ladies, is cited by Doris Stenton as evidence that women continued to take part in military struggles for power after the Conquest.

One of our most important narrative sources of information about women is Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, completed about 731. Bede's presentation of ecclesiastical women tends to the hagiographic style, and miracles and visions are frequent; but the existence of these women and the main events associated with them need not be doubted. The most important contribution of the *History* to this study is its plentiful evidence that in the early Anglo-Saxon period women played a prominent part in organised religion. After the Conversion, it became the practice for female members of royal families to found monasteries which housed both men and women. The double monastery is characteristic of the Anglo-Saxon age preceding the Danish invasions. Single establishments existed for men, but all the houses for women seem to have been of the double type, presided over by an abbess. Whitelock states in her survey of Anglo-Saxon society that the double monastery was "primarily for nuns." The double monastery with an abbess at its head offered a unique opportunity for women to exercise authority. The monasteries fell into decay during the Danish invasions; and, when they were founded again later, all of them were single houses. The abbesses
of the nunneries that grew up from the time of Alfred on never had the same status as the women who headed the double monasteries of the early period.

The most famous of these royal abbesses is Hild of Whitby, of whom Bede speaks at length. Through the usual examples of religious devotion and special grace emerges a woman of very unusual ability, whom kings looked up to and applied to for advice: "Tantae autem erat prudentiae, ut non solum mediocres quique in necessitatibus suis sed etiam reges et principes nonnumquam ab ea consilium quaererent et invenirent." Five men trained under her became bishops. Hild was abbess at the time of the Synod of Whitby in 664, when it was decided to follow the practices of the Roman rather than the Celtic Church. She thus participated in a historic decision, although Bede does not record that she took part in any of the discussion at the synod.

Among other women who appear in the pages of Bede should be mentioned Æthelthryth, wife of King Ecgfrith and foundress of Ely. For Bede, Æthelthryth's major achievement was her preservation of her virginity through twelve years of marriage. After this her husband reluctantly gave his consent to her taking the veil. Bede includes a poem comparing her with the virgin martyrs, and describing how after her death her body remained uncorrupted because she had preserved her chastity. Elsewhere in the History, Bede describes how the body of Æthelburh was
The religious zeal of these women and their preservation of their virginity are the features stressed by Bede, but it is evident that religious dedication could go hand in hand with a strong organising ability, thereby enabling aristocratic women like Hild and Æthelthryth to exercise powers of leadership and administration.

The kind of presentation found in the more realistic saints' lives is very like that in Bede's accounts of holy women. Two vitae in particular are illustrative of the influential position held by abbesses in the early Anglo-Saxon Church. One is the Life of Bishop Wilfrid, by Eddius Stephanus, which is interesting in that one of the incidents associated with Wilfrid's career involved the alteration of the decision of a synod because of the intervention of Abbess Ælfflæd. Wilfrid had been out of favour with King Aldfrith of Northumbria, and had been dispossessed of his sees of Ripon and Hexham. The synod in question was called to consider Wilfrid's reinstatement, after many years. The others present were unwilling to reinstate Wilfrid, but Ælfflæd, the sister of Aldfrith, turned the decision by reporting her brother's dying speech, in which he expressed his desire to make peace with Wilfrid. On this occasion, Ælfflæd was a respected member of the synod, along with the king (Osred, Aldfrith's son), and various prominent members of the Church and state. It is significant, however, that Ælfflæd's words carried weight.
because she reported the wish of a king.

The other saint's life to be mentioned here is the Life of Leofgyth (Vita Leobae) by Rudolf of Fulda.\textsuperscript{111} The subject of this work is an English nun of the eighth century who went out to assist Boniface in his mission to the heathen Germans and was made by him abbess of a monastery at Tauberbischofsheim. Rudolf's Life gives a portrait of Leofgyth very much in the tenor of Bede's descriptions of Hild and Æthelthryth, stressing Leofgyth's religious devotion and the affection with which she was regarded by her subordinates. Also, Rudolf's account is a further illustration of the prominent part played by Anglo-Saxon women in the expansion of the Church.

We know of Leofgyth not only from Rudolf's account but also from a surviving letter written by her to Boniface.\textsuperscript{112} She requests Boniface to think of her and remember her in his prayers, sends a small gift and some verses, to which she refers deprecatingly, and asks him to correct her Latin. Other women also corresponded with Boniface: Bucge, Ecgburh, Eangyth, Eadburh, and Cena.\textsuperscript{113} All these women were nuns, and most of them became abbesses. Their letters provide a valuable sidelight on the relationship between the English abbesses and a prominent ecclesiastic like Boniface. The style in which these women write shows a mixture of rather passionate affection with exaggerated deference. Ecgburh says that when she feels the bond of his love "quasi quiddam mellitae
Boniface and his successor, Lul, who usually refer to themselves by the brief designation "exiguus servus," or similar term, in the salutations which head their own letters, are much less effusive. The style of the abbesses' letters suggests that the relationship of these women to Boniface, though intimate, was one of inferiors to a superior.

The letters of Boniface himself give indications of contemporary attitudes to women. In his letter to Æthelbald of Mercia, Boniface upbraids the king for fornication with nuns. Boniface regards defilement of nuns as the worst sin of this type:

Nam hoc peccatum duplex esse non dubium est. Ut verbi gratia dicamus, cuius vindicte reus sit puer apud dominum suum, qui uxorem domini sui adulteris violaverit: quanto magis ille, qui sponsam Christi creatoris caeli et terrae putredine suae libido vis conmaculaverit . . .117

These words reveal the sense of hierarchy deeply engrained in the Anglo-Saxon way of thinking. Women were part of this hierarchy by being attached to men of various ranks, but the nun was the bride of Christ.118

Later in the same letter, Boniface speaks with approval of the customs of the heathen Germans. When a
wife is guilty of adultery, she is whipped half-naked through the streets by the other matrons of the town. Boniface's approval is an illustration of the Church's severity towards female unchastity, and his fulminations against fornication are in a way the counterpart to Bede's celebration of virginity. The same concern also appears in Boniface's letter to Archbishop Cuthbert, in which he complains of the dangers which beset women on the pilgrimage to Rome: they usually end up as prostitutes in one of the towns en route.

The conclusions drawn from all the various kinds of sources can now be brought together. A clear picture emerges, although the circumstantial details are missing. It is evident that the usual position for Anglo-Saxon women was not one of independence. Their subordination to fathers, husbands, or male relatives appears clearly in the laws. The other sources—penitentials, writs, charters, marriage contracts, lawsuits, wills, histories, vitae, letters—support the evidence of the laws with some qualification. The penitentials show a rather severe attitude to women, but at the same time emphasise that they should be treated as persons with certain rights. The remaining sources indicate that in most circumstances men dominate affairs, but that there are special cases in which certain categories of women have the power of independent action. The collective impression created by the evidence of various kinds is that women's position,
though not debased, was markedly restricted.

The generally dependent position of Anglo-Saxon women is qualified by two factors: first, the position of women improved in the course of the period; second, throughout the period, the relative dependence of women varied according to their class. The laws indicate that there was an overall improvement in the status of women in the course of the Anglo-Saxon era. Whereas the Laws of Ethelbert indicate that in 600 A.D. Anglo-Saxon women were regarded as chattels, the Laws of Cnut show that in the eleventh century women, though still far from equal, were regarded as persons with an identity of their own. It is widows who profited most from this improvement in status. Whereas unmarried girls and married women continued subject, though less so, to the decisions of fathers and husbands, respectively, widows achieved a limited degree of independence. This overall improvement applied to the population as a whole. In fact, the rise in the status of women during the five hundred years of the recorded Anglo-Saxon era makes the difference between the early and late Anglo-Saxon period in this respect much greater than that between the late Anglo-Saxon and the post-Conquest era.

Wealthy women benefited especially from the general improvement in women's condition. This fact emerges from the more advantageous position accorded women in the large land settlements mentioned by wills, marriage contracts, and lawsuits, in contrast to the less favourable position
assigned to the generality of women in the laws. Thus, wealthy widows of the late period are the Anglo-Saxon women who came closest to achieving independence.

Female members of royal families belong to a special category. Annals and histories show that it was not normal for them to manage affairs, but that, occasionally, doubtless because of the special mystique attached to royalty, they were allowed to assume control. Mostly, they acted as figureheads, witnessing documents and appearing on public occasions, but, in rare cases, they actually took up the reins of power: they led armies and ruled kingdoms.

Thus, royal women were prominent, though mainly inactive, in secular affairs. However, their special prestige did regularly lead them to positions of authority connected with the Church. Such positions, though formally cut off from the world, in fact, in the early period, enabled them to wield very great influence as the abbesses of double monasteries. Prominent male clerics, as well as nuns, were associated with these institutions, and, hence, the abbesses in charge occupied positions of great importance. When, later, nuns were housed in exclusively female convents, the abbesses lost the larger influence enjoyed by their predecessors. However, even the great abbesses of the early period were not of equal status with the senior (male) functionaries of Church and state.

The generally inferior status of Anglo-Saxon women
is qualified, then, by an overall improvement in their status, by the more independent position of wealthy widows in the late period, and by the special position of royal women. Nevertheless, for the most part women in Anglo-Saxon times were subject to men's governance and were not able to take an active role outside the home. Harshness to women is seen especially in the area of offences against the sexual code, and this severity is reinforced by the attitude of the Church. The only women who attained public authority at any time in the period were either of royal blood or closely linked with royalty. In spite of the tendency of scholars to stress the independence of the Anglo-Saxon woman, the typical woman of that era was anything but independent. The arguments for the independence of Anglo-Saxon women have been chiefly based on the evidence of the wills and lawsuits, evidence pertaining to wealthy widows in the tenth and eleventh centuries, who, as I have demonstrated, are decidedly atypical. For the most part, Anglo-Saxon women were not allowed to make for themselves the major decisions affecting the course of their lives. The ways in which this state of affairs influences their characterisation in the poetry will emerge in the succeeding chapters.
Footnotes

1 "Anglo-Saxon Poetry and the Historian," TRHS, 4th series, 31 (1949), 75-94. This tendency is the weakness of Roeder's study. See Introduction, p. 5.

2 In this dissertation, the Anglo-Saxon period is taken to mean the time from the settlement to the Norman Conquest, but most of the discussion will necessarily apply to the period after 600, when writing begins as a result of the Conversion.

3 The system of private penance associated with the penitentials sometimes received official censure, partly because of the variation between the different penitentials, and partly because a need was felt for the old system of public penance for public offences. The penitentials were condemned by synods at Chalon in 813 and at Paris in 829. See Medieval Handbooks of Penance, eds. J. T. McNeill and H. M. Gamer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1938; rep. Octagon Books, 1965), p. 27.

4 In contrast with the highly fictitious, "epical" saints' lives, discussed in Chapter IV.


6 See Buckstaff, p. 251.

7 One particularly striking piece of evidence, cited by both Doris Stenton and her husband, F. M. Stenton, is slightly post-Conquest, and appears in Domesday Book. This is the reference to a certain Asa in Yorkshire, who "held her land separate and free from the lordship of Bernulf her husband." See D. M. Stenton, pp. 27-28, and, for a fuller account, F. M. Stenton, "The Historical Bearing of Place-Name Studies: The Place of Women in Anglo-Saxon Society," TRHS, 4th series, 24 (1943), 11-12. The value of this piece of evidence is limited not only by its lateness, but also by its origin in the Danelaw, which raises the question of possibly greater freedom for women in the area of Scandinavian influence.

8 Buckstaff, p. 256.

9 Bandel, pp. 115-18.

Only the briefest description is given here, and no account is taken of the various complications. These problems are discussed fully by Chadwick.

See the Laws of Ethelbert, sections 10, 14, and 16, in *Die Gesetze der Angelsachsen*, ed. F. Liebermann (Halle, 1903-16; rep. 1960), vol. I. In sec. 10, the general term mæggenman is used for the slave, in secs. 14 and 16 the more specific term birele (server of drink). Secs. 11 and 16 also make provision for lower fines payable for violation of more menial slaves.

All subsequent citations of the Anglo-Saxon laws are taken from Liebermann's edition.

The law states that the fine is payable to "pam byrgæan" (18.1), meaning the person responsible for the contract of betrothal. This suggests the woman's legal guardian. The Laws of Ethelbert also enumerate fines for breach of guardianship over (i.e., sexual interference with) widows according to their rank. A distinction is made between breach of mund (this offence is, presumably, simply sexual violation) and actual taking of a woman who does not belong to one (presumably, forced marriage). The latter offence is subject to twice as high a fine as the former. See Ethelbert, secs. 75, 75.1, and 76.

This does not necessarily mean that the woman does not suffer by law. The abducted nun mentioned in Alfred's
Laws is to have none of her husband's inheritance, and neither is her child (secs. 8.1 and 8.2). And, as we shall see later, there are legal penalties for unfaithful wives. But the emphasis in the laws cited above is on the guilt or injury involving the male parties. The abducted nun is deprived of her husband's inheritance because her marriage is regarded as dubious, if not exactly invalid.

23 Ine, sec. 38.

24 Cnut, II, secs. 76, 76.1, 76.1a, and 76.1b:

25 Cf. Roeder's statement that the laws and the poetry complement one another, in that they deal with different sections of society. See p. 6 and pp. 89-90.

26 Ethelbert, secs. 77 and 77.1.

27 Ibid., sec. 82.

28 Ibid., sec. 31.

29 Ine, sec. 31.

30 Roeder, p. 23. See also p. 31. Roeder stresses that the ceremony is a civil contract. I do not propose to discuss here the distinction between the betrothal and the wedding, since a decision on this subject does not affect any conclusion drawn about the position of women. It is, in fact, very difficult to distinguish between the two, and the sharp line drawn by Roeder is not convincing. The passage quoted is taken from his discussion of betrothal. His distinction between the entirely civil nature of the betrothal contract and the church blessing attached to the wedding itself is acceptable—and significant. Roeder notes that even in the latter case the religious element is not essential, and states "dass die Ehe in der That . . . juristisch geschlossen ist, der Priester aber hieran keinen Teil hat, sondern der vollzogenen Eheschliessing nur den kirchlichen segen erteilt" (p. 58).

31 Cnut, II, sec. 53. This law has a Scandinavian parallel. See Roeder, p. 136.

32 See Cnut, II, secs. 50, 50.1, 51, 51.1, 52, 52.1, 54, and 54.1.

33 Roeder points out a similar inequity in the attitude to unfaithfulness on the part of betrothed persons. He cites sec. 18 of Alfred's Laws (mentioned above), which assigns fines payable for sexual misconduct with a betrothed woman. Roeder notes that the laws contain no clause about a betrothed man, and believes that this is to
be explained by a social attitude "die ursprünglich dem Mann erlaubte, in Konkubinat und Vielweiberei zu leben" (p. 38). Again, Roeder believes the fact that only the wife is severely punished for infidelity stems from the early concept of the married woman as her husband's property (p. 133, see also p. 136).

34 Ine, sec. 57.
35 Cnut, II, secs. 76, 76.1, 76.1a, and 76.1b.
36 Roeder, p. 84.
38 BWW, sec. 7. Printed in Liebermann, I, 442. BWW is discussed more fully later in the chapter.
39 See Roeder, p. 89. The passage runs: "Similiter si mulier homicidium faciat, in eam vel progeniem vel parentes ejus vindicetur, vel inde componat; non in virum suum, seu clientelam innocentem . . . ."
40 The fact that the wife belongs to a different kin from her husband is pointed out by Lorraine Lancaster, who stresses the bilateral (rather than patrilineal) nature of the Anglo-Saxon kin group, "Kinship in Anglo-Saxon Society," British Journal of Sociology, 9 (1958), 230-50, and 359-77.
41 Ethelbert, secs. 79 and 80.
42 Hlothhere and Eadric, sec. 6; Ine, sec. 38.
43 Alfred, sec. 27. Also cf. Alfred, sec. 8.3, which implies that part of the wergild was paid to the maternal, part to the paternal kin. Presumably the proportions would be the same.
44 Æthelstan, II, sec. 11.
45 Cnut, II, sec. 53.
46 Cf. n. 7. The reference to Asa's holding her land separate from the lordship of her husband suggests that such a degree of independence was unusual.
47 Ethelbert, secs. 78-81.
48 See Anglo-Saxon Wills, ed. Whitelock (Cambridge, 1930), passim.
Cnut, II, sec. 70.1.

Ine, sec. 57.

See Buckstaff, pp. 251 and 260.

Cnut, II, sec. 74.

V Ethelred, sec. 21.

Ibid., sec. 21.1. Roeder suggests that the reason for a twelve-month waiting period before a widow can remarry is the possibility of a posthumous child (pp. 139-40).

See n. 31.

Cnut, II, secs. 73 and 73a.

Be Wifmannes Beweddunge, like the marriage contracts, deals mainly with preliminaries, and hence pertains to the betrothal more than the marriage ceremony itself, but no sharp distinction is made between the two. Cf. n. 30. Sec. 8 of BWW evidently refers to the actual wedding, for which the word used is gift—the "giving" of the bride.

BWW, sec. 1.

Ibid., sec. 2.

Ibid., sec. 3.

Ibid., sec. 4.

V Ethelred, sec. 21.1, and Cnut, II, sec. 73.

Ibid., sec. 73.3.

Cf. English Historical Documents, I, c. 500-1042 (London, 1955), trans. Whitelock, 446. Here Whitelock translates a charter in which Nothhelm, King of the South Saxons, grants land to his sister Notgyth for the founding of a monastery (c. 692).

See EHD, I, 440-56, passim.

The special position accorded to queens was not peculiar to the Anglo-Saxons. The wives of the post-Conquest kings, down to Eleanor of Aquitaine, the wife of Henry II, acted as chancellors for their husbands and issued writs during their absence on military campaigns. I am indebted for this and other information pertaining to the post-Conquest period to Donna Gordon and her paper "The Social Status of Women in Post-Conquest England, 1066-1216,"
presented to the Guild for Medieval and Renaissance Studies at the University of Alberta, November 21, 1974.

67 This marriage contract is printed in Anglo-Saxon Charters, ed. and trans. Agnes Robertson (Cambridge, 1956), p. 148.

68 Ibid., p. 150.
69 Ibid., pp. 136-38.
70 Ibid., pp. 150-52.

71 Printed in Essays in Anglo-Saxon Law, by Adams, Lodge, Young, and Laughlin (Boston, 1876), pp. 342-47. Among the cases found in this volume are several which involve women primarily or incidentally, including the disputes described above. The date 961 is assigned to the record of the dispute between Badgifu and Goda.

72 Ibid., pp. 362-63. The case is dated "after 1000."


74 In support of this statement, he cites the mention in the Ramsey Chronicon of the death-bed will of Thurgunt, made "permittente viro suo Thurkillo." Sheehan comments on the wills made jointly by husband and wife:

"However, the manner in which the text of the will slips from the first person plural to the third person singular masculine, or from the third person plural to the direct words of the husband, indicates the prominent part the latter played in the transaction."


75 Cf. Lancaster, p. 363.

76 Printed in Select English Historical Documents of the Ninth and Tenth Centuries, ed. F. E. Harmer (Cambridge, 1914), pp. 15-19.

77 See Ethelbert's Laws, secs. 75, 75.1, and 76, and cf. n. 20. Cf. also Roeder, pp. 141-42, and 146. See Roeder, pp. 159-61 on the change in the status of women in the course of the Anglo-Saxon period.

78 Buckstaff refers to the Charter of Liberties of Henry I, which guarantees the inheritance rights of widows, including childless widows, and protects them against forced marriage (pp. 256-57), although she regards this as
a promise unfulfilled. D. M. Stenton observes that Magna Carta confirms the widow's right to the land she brought to the marriage and her right not to be constrained to remarry (pp. 50-51).


80 See the Penitential of Theodore, I: XIV, secs. 9-12. Here, the violation of a slave incurs a much lighter penance than violation of a free woman, while in the latter case the penance is graded in ascending stages, according to whether the woman is married, a virgin, or a nun. All references to the Penitential of Theodore are made to the U text as printed by P. W. Finsterwalder, Die Canones Theodori Cantuariensis und ihre Überlieferungsformen (Weimar, 1929). Finsterwalder compares the various groups of manuscripts, and prints four texts, of which the U is by far the fullest. It is the U group of manuscripts on which McNeill bases his translation in his Medieval Handbooks of Penance.


82 Theodore, II: XII, secs. 5-6.

83 Ibid., sec 10. Cf. n. 54, above.

84 Ibid., sec. 11.

85 Ibid., I: XIV, secs. 19-23. Similar attempts to limit marital intercourse can be seen in the homilies. Cf. Roeder, p. 132.

86 Ibid., II: XII, secs. 30-31.

87 Ibid., I: XIV, secs. 17-18. Roeder quotes corresponding restrictions from the Canons of Gregory on marital intercourse during menstruation or after conception, but regards these as "rein sanitäre" regulations (pp. 132-33). This strain in the penitentials is to be attributed to the influence of the Mosaic Law. Cf. Roeder, pp. 150 and 174-75.

88 Theodore, II: XII, secs. 36-37. The ages vary within a few years in the different manuscripts.

89 Roeder believes that in some respects the Church refined Anglo-Saxon mores and introduced a higher cultural ideal (p. 161). Several of Ethelred's codes, including the code of 1008, which stresses the rights of widows, show marked ecclesiastical influence. See pp. 33-34, above, and cf. Whitelock's remarks, EHD, I, p. 405.

90 Two Saxon Chronicles Parallel, eds. C. Plummer and
J. Earle (Oxford, 1892-99; rep. 1952), I, 34 and 35. Æthelthryth was the daughter of King Anna of East Anglia and the wife of Ecgfrith of Northumbria.

91 Ibid., pp. 38-39. Hild was a member of the Northumbrian royal family.

92 Ibid., pp. 34-35. Cenwalh was King of Wessex.

93 Ibid., p. 41. Ethelred was King of Mercia; thus, Osthryth was killed by her own subjects.

94 Ibid., p. 43. A reference to events in Wessex.

95 Ibid., pp. 30-32.

96 Ibid., pp. 93-95, 98-101, and 105.

97 Ibid., p. 105.

98 Ibid., pp. 158-61.

99 Ibid., pp. 158-59.

100 Ibid., pp. 162-63.

101 In connection with Eleanor's independence, it may be noted here that she continued to hold Aquitaine, inherited from her father, in her own right. Cf. n. 66, above.


103 Beginnings of English Society, p. 171.

104 Bede's Ecclesiastical History, eds. B. Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford, 1969), pp. 404-14. This edition gives the Latin text with facing English translation. Hild was the patroness of the poet Cædmon. The account of the angelic inspiration of Cædmon, the cowherd, to sing the Creation, is one of the most famous passages in Bede.

105 Ibid., p. 408.

106 Ibid.

107 Ibid., pp. 296-308.

108 Ibid., pp. 396-400.

109 Ibid., p. 240.
See Clinton Albertson, S.J., *Anglo-Saxon Saints and Heroes* (Fordham University Press, 1967), pp. 155-56. Albertson translates extracts from a number of Anglo-Latin saints' lives. See also his note 121, p. 156, where he cites the numerous royal women who exercised their influence in Wilfrid's career.


Ibid., pp. 18-19.

Ibid., p. 21.

Ibid., pp. 146-55.

Ibid., p. 148.

Cf. Alfred's laws on the forced marriage of nuns and on insult to nuns, Alfred, secs. 8 and 18.

The non-literary sources of information about the position of women are scanty in the extreme. Archaeological confirmation of the prominence of kings' wives and the fact that they occasionally assumed real power is to be found in the appearance of the head of Cynethryth, wife of Offa of Mercia, on two silver pennies from his reign. See D. M. Stenton, pp. 2-3. It has been argued by Sir Frank Stenton that the place-names of England provide evidence for female ownership of land in the Anglo-Saxon period, *TRHS*, 4th series, 24 (1943), 1-13. But we are not really justified in drawing such a conclusion. All that place-name evidence proves is that the person whose name is preserved was considered worthy of commemoration.

It is possible that this statement does not apply to all of the abbesses; certainly, all of them were aristocratic.
CHAPTER II

CHARACTER-TYPES IN THE POETRY

Although the subjects of Anglo-Saxon poetry are mainly heroic and military, and thus constitute a somewhat restricted, conservative, and idealised view of the upper echelons of society, the attitudes to be found in the poetry run parallel to those in the historical sources. Just as the historical documents show Anglo-Saxon society to be male dominated and rigidly stratified, the atmosphere of the poetry is almost exclusively male, and the characters are mainly defined by the standard roles which they fulfil. As far as the women characters are concerned, the poetry gives aristocratic women the same significant but restricted ceremonious role that they played in the historical world. The exception to this state of affairs is to be found in the religious field, where in the poetry, as in the early history of the period, an active part is given to certain leading women. What we do not find in the poetry are the independent aristocratic women who play an active part in secular life. The ruling queens who crop up occasionally in the Chronicle and other historical accounts have no counterpart in the poetry. Neither do we find the wealthy widows of the late period, who, as evinced by wills and
lawsuits, were able to manage and dispose of their own property. The poetry, conservative in character, and stemming mainly from the early and middle centuries of the Anglo-Saxon era, reflects, with stylisation, the typical social situations of the earlier period.

The female characters of Old English poetry fall into several sharply defined categories, to be related to other equally well defined male types. The latter are more numerous and prominent: the ideal king (Scyld, Beowulf I); the hero (Beowulf, Finn, Waldere); the aged leader (Hrothgar, Byrhtnoth); the wicked king (Heremod, Nebuchadnezzar); the man of God (Guthlac, Andrew, Daniel); the exile, a type to be subdivided into the wicked outcast (Satan, Grendel), and the wise solitary (the Wanderer, the Seafarer). Only two female types occur with any frequency: the ideal queen (Ealhhild, Wealhtheow), and the holy woman (Judith, Juliana, Helena). These two types share some of their major qualities with their male counterparts, but also possess certain markedly different characteristics. There are hints of a stereotype for the good ceorlisc woman which merges into that of the ideal queen, and also of a contrasting stereotype for the female slave. Thryth in Beowulf may be an isolated example of the type of the bad queen. In contradistinction to these vestigial types, the female exiles in The Wife's Lament and Wulf and Eadwacer seem to represent a conscious attempt to adapt the standardised figure of the male exile to a female
situation.

The vast majority of the characters in Old English poetry are derived from one of the familiar stereotypes. Their actions are predictable, and they hardly ever do anything to surprise us. This is true even of some of the most powerful and sophisticated poetic creations. Some of the more memorable characters, such as Beowulf and Byrhtnoth, combine more than one of the stereotypes, but they are in no sense individualised. With very few exceptions, the characters of Old English poetry embody a certain restricted range of human qualities, and can be described fairly completely by listing the prescribed qualities applied to them. A brief description of the various character-types will illustrate the, usually rather simple, principles on which characters are formed in Old English poetry. I shall begin with the male types, and then proceed to the female.

The type of the ideal king, to which the ideal queen is a counterpart, is not expanded much per se in Old English, although the qualities associated with this type play a part in the delineation of various major figures, such as Hrothgar. The obvious example of the good king is Scyld Scefing, the eponymous ancestor of the Danish Scylding dynasty. Scyld's glorious life is described briefly but evocatively at the beginning of Beowulf. His characteristic features as king are his military dominance (he repeatedly deprives his enemies of their mead-benches.
[ll. 4-6a];² and he forces the surrounding tribes to pay him tribute [ll. 9-11a]), his splendid state (indicated by the magnificence of his funeral), and the affection with which he is regarded by his men (ll. 29 and 49b-50a). An essential feature of the ideal king which is not specifically mentioned in the case of Scyld, but is the salient quality of his son (the first Beowulf of the poem), is generosity to his followers. Beowulf I ensures his men's future loyalty in battle by dispensing gifts "on fæder [bea]rme" (l. 21). The same requirement is made of an ideal king as of a good prince like the first Beowulf.

His more famous namesake is presented in the first half of the poem as the embodiment of the ideal hero. The characters who conform to this type are endowed not merely with courage and daring, but with a specific assertiveness. Their self-confidence is exuberant and outspoken; it amounts to boastfulness without the negative connotations of that quality. Beowulf's proud bearing on his first introduction to Hrothgar's court is the exemplification of this confidence. He makes his beot to defeat Grendel or die (ll. 435-55 and 601b-06).³ Wiglaf's later declaration of loyalty to Beowulf (ll. 2633-60 and 2663-68) is characterised by the same heroic determination. There is no female equivalent to this type.

The classic portrayal of the hero is to be found in the battle lays: Waldere, The Fight at Finnsburh, The Battle of Maldon, and The Battle of Brunanburh. The various
aspects of the hero's code are found collected together in Wiglaf's speeches and scattered through the various speeches of Byrhtnoth's retainers in *Maldon*: the reminder of the boast spoken in the hall (*Beowulf*, ll. 2633-38a; *Maldon*, ll. 212-14); the affection for the lord (*Beowulf*, l. 2663; *Maldon*, ll. 224b-25 and 317b-19); the disgrace of returning home without avenging him (*Beowulf*, ll. 2353-56a; *Maldon*, ll. 220-23a and 249-52a). The strength of the kinship bond, which makes itself felt in the closing lines of Ælfwine's speech (*Maldon*, l. 225), appears more indirectly in the *Beowulf* poet's introduction of Wiglaf: "sibb æfre ne mæg / wiht onwendan þam þe wel þenceð" (ll. 2600b-01). Wiglaf, Byrhtnoth's companions, Finn and his warriors, Waldere, and the triumphant English at Brunanburh are all characterised with strong, simple strokes, and without internal conflict or complexity. Their moral position is clear and assured: absolute and unflinching loyalty to leader or cause, and the aim of the poets is evidently to rouse a corresponding martial spirit in their audience.

Contrasting with the type of the (normally young) hero is that of the aged leader. Again, the type has no female equivalent. The most conspicuous representatives of this category are Hrothgar, Beowulf in old age, and Byrhtnoth. These characters are surrounded with an aura of melancholy; they are faced with death or defeat, and respond not with defiance, but with resignation. Swift action is replaced by reflectiveness: Hrothgar moralises,
and Beowulf muses on his past life. There are no extended reflections in *Maldon*, but Byrhtnoth's dying prayer (ll. 173-80) has the same pensive quality. Though courageous, these figures are characterised by a mildness and sensibility that contrast sharply with the self-assertion of the previous type. Hrothgar is repeatedly seen grieving for his thanes, and he sheds tears at Beowulf's departure (ll. 1876b-77). Beowulf is eulogised in the final lines of the poem as "manna mildust ond mon(ðw)ærust, / leodum liðost ond lofgeornost" (ll. 3181-82). "Mildust ond monðwærust" scarcely applies to him as a young man. The aged Beowulf prepared to die with a quiet dignity similar to Byrhtnoth's, and both utter speeches which begin by thanking God for his favour (*Beowulf*, l. 2794; *Maldon*, l. 173).

More complex effects are sometimes achieved not by a departure from, but by a combination of the stereotypes. In *The Battle of Maldon*, Byrhtnoth shifts from the defiant warrior hurling insults at the Danes to the old man facing death with quiet resignation. The effect is to give an added tragic dimension to his character. The same is true of Beowulf, a character presented expansively and with depth, but with almost no individualisation. In *Beowulf*, the total character emerges from the juxtaposition of the young hero in the first half of the poem with the old man in the second. There is absolutely no transition between the two, and the discrepant halves are bound together not
by unifying qualities peculiar to the hero, but by a piety and courtesy which inform the whole poem, and characterise the utterances of the poet as well as those of his main actor.

The melancholy reflectiveness of the aged leader is a feature shared by another standardised type: the exile. Here we have a character-type originally male, which has also been extended to female characters. The state of exile is the epitome of misery in Old English poetry, for the way of life reflected in the poetry centres on the close-knit group of the tribe or the comitatus, and an outsider from the group is in a position of especial distress. The "locus classicus" for the characteristic features of exile is The Wanderer. Here we find numerous motifs that occur in exilic situations in other poems: the loss of one's lord, the wandering through a hostile natural environment, the thought of the joys of comradeship in the hall, etc. The speaker describes himself as hean (1. 23), earm (1. 40), and wineleas (1. 45), an anhaga (11. 1 and 40). He must "tread the tracks of exile" ("wadan wræclastas;" 1. 5). These expressions, and others like them, are the typical terms associated with exile, and they recur whenever the situation of an exile is evoked. Stanley B. Greenfield has classified the formulaic expression of the exile theme into four aspects: status, illustrated by such expressions as "wineleas guma" (e.g., Wanderer, 1. 45); deprivation, illustrated by formulas involving verbs of
bereavement (e.g., "eôle bidæled," Wanderer, l. 20); state
of mind, expressed by combinations of the adjectives for
wretchedness; and movement in or into exile, especially
associated with the image of the "tracks of exile." The
originally purely social concept of exile is extended to
the Christian concept of exile in the world (i.e., from
heaven or paradise) or from God's favour. The former
applies to the wise solitaries like the Wanderer, and the
latter to the sinful exiles like Satan and Grendel.

The sinful exile has affinities with the wicked
king, a type largely constituted by negating or perverting
the good qualities of the ideal king and the hero. There
is some slight evidence for a female version of this type.
The figures corresponding to this category are characterised
by cruelty and the pride that goes before a fall, as
evidenced by Heremod in Beowulf, Eormanric in Deor and
Widsith, Holofernes in Judith, and Nebuchadnezzar and
Belshazzar in Daniel. These characters have perverted the
heroic qualities of strength, authority, and self-esteem
into violence, oppression, and sinful pride. Also, the
good king's essential attribute of generosity has been
reversed to meanness. Heremod shows all these features.
Although God has advanced him in strength beyond all other
men (ll. 1716-18a), he has misdirected his gifts, has
become bloodthirsty (l. 1719), slays his retainers in fits
of rage (ll. 1713-14a), and refuses to distribute rings
(ll. 1719-20a). He becomes so intolerable that he is
finally expelled from his kingdom. The Deor poet speaks of Eormanric as "grim cyning" (1. 23) and refers to his "wylfenne gepoht" (1. 22a). In Widsith he is termed "wrapes wærlogan" (1. 9). The perversion of good qualities which is characteristic of this type is demonstrated in the depiction of Holofernes storming and yelling at his feast (Judith, 11. 23–25). This raucous occasion is a corruption of the festivities in the meadhall which the Anglo-Saxon poets usually celebrate in the warmest terms. Holofernes' feast is the antithesis of the joyful and courteous feasts in Beowulf. Holofernes was, of course, punished for his arrogance, and so were the other two biblical tyrants of Old English Poetry: Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar. Their sinful pride in their own earthly magnificence was finally humbled by the God of Israel whom they had despised.

The arrogant presumption of these tyrants in the biblical poetry forms a contrast with the steadfast humility of the champions of God. These figures can be divided into two categories according to their sex. The female saints or holy women share some of the qualities of their male counterparts, but are also typified by additional, quite separate characteristics. Chief among the patriarchs and male saints of Old English poetry are Moses in Exodus, Andrew in Andreas, and Guthlac and Daniel in the poems which bear their respective names. All these persons combine qualities of leadership with a certain
isolation, physical, spiritual, or both. They are granted special wisdom, and special grace to know the future or perform miracles. Andrew is favoured with some rather spectacular miracles and personal conversations with God, who appears to him in human form. Moses stretches out his hand to part the Red Sea. Daniel does not perform miracles, but he is set apart by the wisdom which enables him to interpret Nebuchadnezzar's prophetic dreams, and the writing on the wall. Guthlac is visited morning and evening by an angel who teaches him to read men's secret thoughts. As he lies dying, a light from heaven shines around him, and a sweet vapour rises from his mouth. All these men are leaders and teachers; even Guthlac, the hermit, gives instruction and moral leadership to the disciple who visits him.

Almost all characterisation in Old English poetry can be related to an underlying pattern of linking and contrasting stereotypes. The female characters, which are the especial concern of this study, must be set against this background, and understood in their relation to the overall pattern of, mainly male, stereotypes. Few significant roles for women are to be found in the cultural milieu of the poetry: the aristocratic, male world of the comitatus, whose life centres on the meadhall and the battlefield. The character qualities to be found in the major stereotypes are chosen for the sake of their applicability to retainer or lord. Such qualities, as we have seen, are leadership
(good or bad), strength (whether it be dedicated courage or wanton violence), generosity (and its converse, meanness), and pride in achievement (whether heroic self-confidence or sinful arrogance). The same attitude of mind to be found behind the Anglo-Saxon laws, with their sharp divisions between the classes of society and their specification of the rules for each class, lies behind the characterisation in the poetry, where a fixed range of qualities is considered appropriate to a certain character-type. The literary characters are visualised in terms of their roles as either members of or leaders of a band of warriors, or, in the case of the exile, they are defined by the very fact of being excluded from that group. There are only one or two female stereotypes which can have a place in such a milieu. The parts that remain available to women characters are either rather slight parts accessory to the comitatus group, or a feminisation of male roles.

In the former category comes the type of the good queen, that is, the leader's wife who has a ceremonial part to play in the festivities of the hall. She corresponds to the historical queens in the Anglo-Saxon period, who, as we know from the Chronicle and from charters, regularly played a formal part in public affairs. This character-type includes by extension any virtuous noblewoman regarded as a formal appurtenance of the meadhall life. There is also some scanty evidence of a "bad queen" type, "the antithesis
of the good queen, as Heremod is antithetical to Scyld. And there are minimal traces of a servant type, also contrasting with the type of the noblewoman. There are no Amazons in Old English poetry: no female counterpart of the male roles in which physical strength is an important constituent. The moral strength of the spiritual leader has its female counterpart in the woman saint. The fairly lengthy treatment of this type (it is the subject of three long poems) in a poetry which scarcely abounds in female characters, is, of course, to be attributed to the influence of the Church rather than the native heroic tradition. Finally, there is, in two short poems, a striking adaptation of the exile theme to the situation of women characters.

Examples of the ideal queen are Wealhtheow and Hygd in Beowulf, Ealhhild in Widsith, and the nameless sinchroden lady in The Husband's Message. This type is defined as much by the royal position and the formal functions that go with it as by personal qualities. One of the two Old English gnomic poems, collections of aphorisms which largely consist in defining the characteristic qualities of things, contains a description, much longer than the usual gnomic definition, of the nature of a queen. She is bought by her husband; she joins with him in being generous with gifts to the retainers, and giving them counsel; she is cheerful, wise, and well loved; at banquets she offers the cup first to her husband
(Maxims I, ll. 81-92). As set out in this definition, the essence of the queen is constituted by her being the lady of the comitatus, the complement of its lord. She shares her husband's prescribed qualities of generosity, kindliness, and popularity, but his more aggressive qualities are replaced in her by wisdom and good counsel.

The various good queens in Old English poetry can all be related to the archetype in Maxims I. Hygelac's wife Hygd is wise—in spite of her young years, and generous (Beowulf, ll. 1926b-31a). The speaker in The Husband's Message assures the lady that she will be reunited with her husband and they will "... ætsomne ... secgum ond gesipum s[inc brytnian], / næglede beagas" (ll. 33-35a). In Beowulf it is Wealhtheow with whom ceremony and courtesy are especially associated in the banqueting scenes. On two occasions, the poet describes how she comes forward, offers the cup to Hrothgar first (i.e., presumably, before she carries it to the others in the hall), and bids him be in good spirits (ll. 612b-18a and 1162b-71a). She is clearly performing a fixed ceremony. Again, it is she who formally presents Beowulf with the gifts given him after the defeat of Grendel.

However, Wealhtheow, though directly based on the simple stereotype of the ideal queen, is the vehicle for one of the Beowulf poet's subtlest effects. The poet brings her courtesy and discretion into play with hints of the future disaster that awaits her family, as she
expresses her confidence that her nephew Hrothulf will be
good to her sons. Thus, the conventional figure of the
courteous queen is used in rather a special way. Two
other, more briefly presented, royal ladies in Beowulf
are also caught up in disaster: Wealhtheow's daughter
Freawaru, and Hildeburh in the Finnsburh episode. Indeed,
the three women are parallel figures, used with cumulative
effect in the development of one of the tragic themes in
Beowulf, and very far removed from the static presentation
of queenliness found in Hygd, in The Husband's Message,
in Widsith, and in Maxims I.9

The character of Thryth or Modthryth10 in Beowulf
is specifically contrasted with the idealised Hygd. Thryth
is everything that a good queen should not be: violent
and disruptive, instead of gentle and reconciling. If any
man so much as dares to look at her, he must die.
Fortunately, Thryth is finally married and reformed by
the heroic Offa. Thryth is the only character of her kind
in Old English poetry, but her resemblance to the arrogant
princess of folk tale, and to such figures as Atalanta,
and Brunhild of the Nibelungenlied, in heroic legend
suggests that she is probably the only surviving
representative of an established type.11 Also, her direct
opposition to Hygd corresponds to the regular patterns of
Old English poetry, in which the character-types are
created largely on the basis of contrast. Thryth bears
resemblance, in name as well as character, to the wicked
Drida or Quendrida in the (later) Latin account of the life of Offa of Mercia. The only other wicked woman in Old English poetry is Grendel's mother, who is a special case. Characterised in part as demon-exile, in part as loyal avenger, she is a striking example of the vivid effects which can be created by combining different stereotypes, but there is nothing distinctively feminine about her.

The type of the servant-girl was probably only used for incidental reference and never regarded as of central interest. That such a type existed is to be inferred from two cursory references in the Riddles to dark-haired (female) Welsh slaves. The references are contemptuous, and obviously a contrast is intended between the dark-haired (and hence ugly) menials and the fair-haired noblewomen who represent ideals of beauty and grace.

The strong background of Latin tradition which lies behind it explains the fact that the woman saint is the most highly developed of the female character-roles. Representatives of this type constitute the main figures in three long Old English poems: Juliana, Elene, and Judith. Strictly speaking, Judith is not a saint at all, but the treatment of her in the poem is obviously indebted to hagiographic tradition. Just as the same qualities are attributed to Old-Testament patriarchs and Christian (male) saints, Judith is presented along the same lines as
Helena and Juliana.

Like the male saints, their female counterparts are both set apart by especial holiness and endowed with an authority that expresses itself in their relations with others. The miraculous element conventionally associated with the saint is the most strongly marked in Juliana, where the heroine is divinely preserved from her torments (although she does finally suffer martyrdom). In Juliana, as in Daniel, the fire prepared for the virtuous (the saint in Juliana, the Three Holy Children in Daniel) turns upon the wicked. In Elene, the miraculous element is more closely connected with Judas-Cyriacus than with Helena herself, but it is at her bidding that Judas prays for a miracle to reveal the buried cross, and later the nails. Judith's single-handed triumph over Holofernes is not precisely a miracle, but it is presented as due to the direct intervention of God.

As for the characteristic quality of leadership, Helena is treated as the leader of her people in the account of the Greeks' expedition to find the cross. Judith is a martial heroine who inspires the fearful Israelites with confidence and leads them to victory in a way similar to Moses in Exodus. Juliana is not a representative of her people, but her natural authority over others is stressed. She responds boldly to the threats of her father and suitor, and reduces to helpless complaining the fiend sent from hell to tempt her. Judith's
slaying of Holofernes is not in itself a great feat, since he is in a stupor at the time, but it is presented as an act of fierce determination with an emphasis on the gory details. Helena rebukes the Jews in a series of vehement speeches, finally threatening them with violent death if they continue to obstruct her enquiries.

In all these respects, the female saints embody the same characteristics as their male counterparts. In their qualities of leadership and courage, the saints, both male and female, are conceived along the same lines as the figures in the native tradition of warrior poetry. But at the same time as the poets stress the militant nature of the female saints, they emphasise their idealised feminine beauty and charm. Reference is made to Judith's curling hair when she is in the very act of killing Holofernes (11. 1036-04). Helena in the midst of the Greek army is described as sincgim (l. 264). Juliana's beauty rouses wonder in the crowd (11. 162b-63a). Her prospective bridegroom calls her "sunnan scima" (l. 166) and speaks of her radiance (głaem, l. 167). This emphasis on the heroine's beauty suggests a link with the ideal queen, and, of course, is also indebted to the Christian tradition of virgin saints stemming in part from veneration of the Virgin Mary herself. However, in Judith, Juliana, and Helena, the combination of two prescribed sets of qualities, the manly heroic and the delicate feminine, is inconsistent. It involves a departure from reality, and the results are
rather stilted.

Although the same veneration of the Virgin and of women saints (usually virgins), which lies behind the three saint-poems is also connected with the veneration accorded to the real-life abbesses of the Anglo-Saxon period, the poetic saints are not the direct reflection of their real-life counterparts in the same way as the queens of Anglo-Saxon heroic poetry reflect the position of real queens. There is something inherently unreal and unworldly about Helena, Juliana, and Judith. The character-type of the female saint does not allow for the more practical qualities (e.g., Hild's "prudentia") which shine through the, admittedly stylised, presentation of Anglo-Saxon abbesses in the prose, for the poetic presentation is based, not on a stylisation of reality, but on a hypothetical ideal.

The two poems about women exiles show a much more remarkable adaptation of a male role to a female situation. Here the plots are not following Latin sources and prescribed traditions. Their adaptation is freer, more independent, and more true to life. The only poems in Old English which employ a female narrator are these two 'elegies': The Wife's Lament and Wulf and Eadwacer. These poems describe the misery of separation from loved ones in terms derived from the same formulaic tradition as the elegies with male speakers, notably The Wanderer and The Seafarer. But in The Wife's Lament and Wulf and Eadwacer
the reason for the speaker's grief is separation, not from lord and comrades, but from husband or lover. The very fact that a love-relationship presented from the feminine point of view appears only in these two poems has meant that many scholars have not acknowledged them as love lyrics spoken by women. The Wife's Lament was originally considered the lament of a male exile, and this interpretation is still defended by some. Wulf and Eadwacer was at first regarded as a riddle, though nearly all scholars now accept it as a love lyric. However, there is a vital difference between these two poems and the other elegies, in that a more intimate and personal atmosphere pervades in the love lyrics. The emphasis here is on a relationship with one other person rather than with a group, and the intensity of passion is not subdued by generalised reflection, as it is in the elegies with male speakers. Thus, the tone of the love poems is quite different: both more poignant and more passionate.

Very few of the characters in Old English poetry fail to conform to one stereotype or another. Some of the more striking characters are created by putting together two different stereotypes. But the characters who stand out as individuals are rare. Even Beowulf is a highly stylised figure. If we look for exceptions, we find the occasional case of a character momentarily brought to vivid life by a touch of humour or human weakness, or, on a more sustained level, deepened by the suggestion of inner
conflict and struggle. It is not remarkable that Beowulf, the longest, and perhaps the most sophisticated Old English poem, provides an instance of each. Beowulf descends from his pedestal for a moment when he administers a tart rebuke to Unferth: "'Hwæt, þu worn fela, wine min Unferð, / beore druncen ymb Brecan spræce'" (ll. 530-31)

A lively passage of a very different kind is the description of Hengest in the Finnsburh episode, forced to follow his lord's slayer, and brooding all the winter, torn by his frustrated longing for vengeance. These are vivid passages, but they are exceptional.

However, a consideration of the examples of female characterisation in particular reveals a surprising proportion of figures who depart from the norms in some significant way. The three hapless queens in Beowulf have a tragic dimension which transcends their traditional qualities as graceful helpmeets. The two female exiles show a kind of personal passion not to be found in their male counterparts. In these cases, the poets seem to be turning to female characters for special effects, and using them to go beyond the rigid lines of convention. Two further instances of female characterisation merit special attention: Eve in Genesis B and Mary in Christ I. Here we have examples of characterisation which does not merely transcend the stereotypes, but virtually ignores them altogether.

In the temptation scene of Genesis B and in Division
VII of *Christ I*, we have a conversation between husband and wife presented in human, domestic terms. The former scene is a representation of the struggle between Adam and Eve, when Eve, having sinned herself, is tempting her husband to eat the fatal apple. The latter scene contains the motif of the "doubting of Mary," in which Joseph, aware that his betrothed is with child, accuses her of unchastity. In each case, the situation is one in which the large-scale heroic antitheses have no place, for the poet is rendering a personal conversation between two ordinary people. Much of the formality of the Old English poetic style remains, but nevertheless these scenes have an intimacy and immediacy unusual in Old English verse. Moreover, both passages have a strong dramatic quality, and there is considerable psychological realism in the way in which the tensions of the situation are conveyed. The *Christ I* scene actually uses the dramatic form: the narrative connections are omitted in order to make the confrontation between the two speakers more vivid. The *Genesis B* scene makes a bold departure of a different kind, in making Eve sin with good intentions. In both passages, the male character's state of mind is of greater complexity, because he is torn by conflicting impulses, but it is significant that the occasion for this conflict is a domestic confrontation. Though the mental situation of the male character is more complex, the personality of the female character is more powerful. In both scenes, the more
persuasive argument is given to the women: to Mary in Christ I and to Eve in Genesis B. The effect is extremely lively, and the use of female figures totally different from that established by convention, i.e., from the rather flat presentation of the good queen or the more vigorous, but ultimately unconvincing presentation of the female saints.

With regard to the female as well as the male characters of Old English poetry, there are certain well-marked types to which most of the persons in the poetry conform. The use of stereotypes does not in itself make characters cold and lifeless, but can give them the force of familiar associations and emotions strongly felt. Beowulf and Byrhtnoth are compelling characters in their way, but they have a certain rigidity and limitation. The female stereotypes, however, have little inherent appeal to the imagination: the conventional queens are passive, and the women saints jarring and inconsistent. Nevertheless, it is among the female characters, or in close association with them, that the most searching and subtle treatment of character takes place. May this not be simply because the female characters are free of the weight of convention? With the exception of the saints, the one substantially developed female type, the female characters belong to the incidentals and the byways of the poetry. There are no prominent and active roles for them to fulfil, and for this very reason they are available for a different kind of exploration: in the area of suffering and thought rather
than action, and of private rather than public experience. In the following chapters, I shall examine the various kinds of female characterisation in turn, in order to develop the implications of this hypothesis in more detail.
Footnotes

1 A classification of the various male types is incidentally suggested by G. N. Garmonsway, at the beginning of his essay "Anglo-Saxon Heroic Attitudes," Franciplegius: Medieval and Linguistic Studies in Honor of Francis Peabody Magoun, Jr., eds. J. B. Bessinger and R. P. Creed (New York, 1965), p. 139. However, Garmonsway is thinking of aspects of the hero, rather than of a general classification:

"Many different attitudes and types of valor and heroic self-assertion are graded before our eyes, exhibited as personifications of the ideal hero, the aged wise king, the young reckless warrior, the faithful councilor, the faithful retainer, and others that are readily apparent."

In "The Main Literary Types of Men in the Germanic Hero-Sagas," JEGP, 14 (1915), 212-25, Grace von Sweringen attempted a classification based on the versions of Germanic legends preserved in various languages. Her categories are: the lover, the hostile kinsman, the avenger (comprising the subtypes of the kinsman, the son, the brother, and the vassal), the tutor, victims of fate, the traitor, the king. Von Sweringen does not evaluate the essential features of each type, but merely lists the persons who belong to it, giving a summary of the situation in which they are involved. She lists female characters in the same way in her earlier article "Women in the Germanic Hero-Sagas," JEGP, 8 (1909), 501-12.


3 The concept of pride as a necessary ingredient in the heroic character is discussed by Levin Schucking in his monograph Heldenstolz und Würde im Angelsächsischen, Abhandlung der Phil. - hist. Klasse der sächs. Akademie der Wissenschaften, 42, no. 5 (Leipzig, 1933). Schucking enumerates the qualities of the hero and the method of presenting them, most frequently in speeches. He distinguishes between two kinds of pride: the heroic (associated with the justifiable boast or beot), and the sinful (associated with the vainglorious boast or gylp), pp. 6-9.

4 J. R. R. Tolkien attributes the tragic quality to a fatal flaw in both Byrhtnoth and Beowulf: heroic "excess," "Ofermod," Essays and Studies, n.s., 6 (1953), 13-18. Similarly, E. G. Stanley regards Beowulf as a virtuous pagan guilty of avarice and vainglory, "Haethenra Hyht in

5 "The Formulaic Expression of the Theme of 'Exile' in Anglo-Saxon Poetry," Speculum, 30 (1955), 200-06.

6 The type of the wise solitary is to be found not only in The Wanderer and The Seafarer, but also in the narrators of other elegiac poems: Deor, Resignation, and The Rhyming Poem.

7 Hrothgar intersperses the above description of Heremod with exilic touches: "'

8 I quote R. F. Leslie's Three Old English Elegies (Manchester, 1961) at this point instead of Krapp's and Dobbie's collected edition, since Leslie supplies the words necessary to complete the sentence. The manuscript is damaged here, but clearly the reference is to persons giving out treasure together, whether or not we accept the words "sinc brytnian" suggested by Leslie.

9 A figure somewhat resembling the unfortunate queens in Beowulf is Beaduhild in Deor. Like them, she is forced to suffer misery because of a feud. Weland wreaks vengeance on her father, Nithhad, by killing his sons, and raping Beaduhild, who bears him a son. Unlike the Beowulf poet, the author of Deor does not exploit the possibilities of this situation, but merely alludes to it very briefly as one of his examples of misfortune.

10 The reading is uncertain. See Klaeber, Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg, 3rd ed. (Boston, 1950), pp. 198-99.

11 Cf. Klaeber, who sees in the Thryth digression the "Taming of the Shrew" motif, edition, p. 195. Thryth may also be compared with the unregenerately wicked Queen Semiramis, in Alfred's translation of Orosius.

12 The Vita Duorum Offarum, written c. 1200. In this work, the name of the woman associated with Offa II seems
to derive from a confusion between the legendary Thryth and the historical wife of Offa of Mercia (Offa II), Cynethryth. See Klaeber, edition, pp. 196-98, and Edith Rickert, "The Old English Offa Saga," MP, 2 (1904-05), 29-76 and 321-76.

13 See Riddle 12, l. 8, "wonfeax Wale"; Riddle 52, l. 6, "wonfah Wale."

14 Beowulf and Byrhtnoth have already been mentioned as characters who combine stereotypes associated with youth and age respectively. In Ongentheow, the Beowulf poet creates a character who does not merely pass from the defiance of youth to the resignation of age, but is striking because he is aged and aggressive at the same time: "eald and egesfull" (1. 2929). Grendel's mother, as noted above, also presents an unusual and effective combination of stereotypes.

15 Cf. the lines in Andreas where the hero shows a little cowardice and suggests that God send an angel, rather than himself, to rescue Matthew from the cannibals of Mermedonia (11. 190-201).
CHAPTER III

FROM THE PROVERBIAL POETRY TO BEOWULF: THE
TRADITIONAL FIGURE OF THE IDEALISED
WOMAN AND ITS EXTENSION

We have seen that there is one highly developed female stereotype in Old English poetry: the saint. The prescribed lines of characterisation for this type are very rigid, and have to do with moral edification rather than faithfulness to human nature. The other main female stereotype, the elements of which are equally standard, but more sketchy, is the idealised queen. The good queen is the female stereotype most commonly found in the secular poetry, but, as noted in the previous chapter, there are hints of other types: the bad queen, and the servant-girl. Further, these types are based on proverbial qualities, good and bad, associated with women. The figure of the good queen merges into that of the good woman, or the desirable woman, and the ideal woman is defined, both positively and negatively, by the ways in which she fulfils her social function. The definition is found at its simplest in the proverbial poetry of the Anglo-Saxons: the Riddles and the Maxims (the two gnomic poems).

There is another group of proverbial poems, the
Charms—incantations to cure sickness or avert misfortune, but these contain no real female characterisation. What we do find in the Charms are hints at the existence of powerful supernatural women. The "hags" in "For a Sudden Stitch" ride loudly over a hill, to shoot spears at the person afflicted with the stitch. In "For Unfruitful Land," there is an invocation to Erce, "eorpan modor," who may be the equivalent of the Germanic fertility goddess Nerthus mentioned by Tacitus. These are slight indications that, in contrast to the poetic presentation of human women, who, in a secular context, are normally inactive, in the framework of pre-Christian religion, supernatural women could be regarded as aggressive beings. There is, perhaps, a link here with the militant saints of the Christian poetry, although, of course the supernatural women of pagan origin can be malevolent as well as beneficent.

Unlike the Charms, the Riddles and Maxims do contain a sprinkling of human, and specifically, female, characterisation. These kinds of poetry do not lend themselves to extended treatment of character, but the latter two groups of poems are of interest in the present enquiry because they give evidence of a background of thought which is elsewhere utilised in a much more substantial piece of characterisation. I refer to the poem Beowulf, in which the figures of Wealhtheow, Hildeburh, and Freawaru are based on the type of the virtuous queen,
but go far beyond it.

To begin, I shall examine the Riddles and Maxims. Both of these genres have their roots in folk wisdom, and the proverbial element in them is strong. The Riddles are found in two groups in the Exeter Book, with a couple of isolated riddles occurring among the poems separating the two series.² Passages of gnomic poetry are common in Old English but here I shall be concerned only with the two exclusively gnomic poems: Maxims I, in the Exeter Book, and Maxims II, sometimes referred to (because of its origin in MS Cotton Tiberius B.i) as the Cotton Gnomes.³ The Old English Riddles are to be associated with the groups of Latin riddles composed by Anglo-Saxon scholars in the late seventh and early eighth centuries.⁴ Some of the Riddles, such as 40 ("Creation"), 60 ("Reed"), and 85 ("Fish and River") are based on Latin originals. Other Riddles, e.g., 26 ("Book"), 47 ("Bookworm"), 48 and 59 ("Chalice"), have subjects with learned, ecclesiastical connotations. In spite of this learned influence, there is a prominent native element, and the atmosphere of some of the Riddles is more homely than that of most Old English poetry. The subjects are often objects familiar to Anglo-Saxon daily life: horn, bow, plough, sun, water, etc. The Maxims consist of proverbial statements defining the universal and essential properties of things: "Frost shall freeze, fire melt wood," etc.⁵ Both genres are concerned with grasping isolatable and recurrent features of life. They
break experience down into its elements, rather than synthesising it into an imaginative recreation of life. Hence, a sustained portrait of character—stereotyped or not—is foreign to their aim, and they present character-traits only in flashes. Nevertheless, they show us the elements of female characterisation which go to make up a proverbial type.

In the Riddles, men and women figure much less prominently than objects and natural phenomena. This is true of both the more elaborate and artistic poems, such as the Storm riddles, and the briefer and simpler ones. What characterisation there is in the Riddles is mainly the personification of inanimate objects. Only rarely are the subjects of the riddles human, and then they are dehumanised. Riddles 36 ("Homo, Mulier, Equus"), 46 ("Lot and His Daughters"), 64 ("Man on Horseback with a Hawk"), and 86 ("One-Eyed Garlic Seller"), the only riddles for which persons are generally proposed as solutions, are all little more than problems of ingenuity. Riddle 36 plays with letters, 46 and 86 with numbers, and 64 with runes. Sometimes the non-human subjects of the riddles are defined by means of family relationships, for instance in Riddle 72 ("Ox"): "sweostor min, / fedde mec [... ] oft ic feower teah / swæse broþor . . ." (11. 5b-7a). Such familial relationships are used fairly mechanically. However, there are quite a number of riddles in which the personified object is endowed with thoughts
and feelings of surprising vigour. A particularly striking example is the shield of Riddle 5: "Ic eom anhaga iserne wund, / bille gebennad, beadoweorca sæd" (ll. 1-2). This lonely warrior, suffering through battle after battle, reminds us of the Wanderer, the Last Survivor (in Beowulf), and the aged Beowulf himself. The reed of Riddle 60 and the inkhorn of Riddle 93 are also vividly presented. The use of the first person characteristic of the Riddles is in such poems much more than a grammatical personification. The objects speak of the vicissitudes of their lives in a way that suggests real feeling, and a genuine empathy on the part of the poet.

The human background against which the subjects of the Riddles are presented is not one in which women play a large part; it is the male world of warriors and mead hall. The words "Ic seah in healle" and þær hæleð druncon" are recurrent. Even when another setting is referred to, the terminology employed is still that of the hall. This is true of Riddle 59, "Chalice," where the object is described as a golden ring seen in the hall. Again, the bible of Riddle 67 is found gold-adorned where men drink.

The ubiquitous hall-setting is the focus of that relationship between man and lord which pervades the Riddles. It is a relationship underlying the whole of Old English poetry, and here it provides the link between the various social strata described in the Riddles, each layer
having its servants and masters; it is also the link between
the inanimate and the human realm. The relationship
between men and women is but another aspect of this
underlying background of thought. The sun is the servant
of God and afflicts men with its heat "þonne mec min frea
feohtan hateþ" (Riddle 6, l. 5). The sword of Riddle 20
and the horn of Riddle 80 are "fream minum leof" (1. 2 in
both poems). The plough serves the ploughman (Riddle 21,
11. 3 and 15). In exactly the same way, the wife is the
loyal servant of her husband. Riddle 61 ("Helmet")
describes a noblewoman formally attending her husband and
giving him his armour—in this case, the helmet.\(^8\) The
attitude of dignified service bears out the parallel
between wifely duty and thanely duty noticed in Chapter I,
where we found that the marriage pledge and the thane's oath
of allegiance employed the same terminology. The
relationship of wife to husband is only a part of a world
of essentially male loyalties.

The appearances of women in the Riddles are brief
and incidental. Occasionally they are mentioned, serving
mead, as one of the characteristic features of the scene
in the hall—along with the cups, the benches, and the
drinking thanes. These female figures are accompanied by
stock epithets which refer to social class and external
appearance. Noblewomen, ceorlisc women, and slaves appear.
The two former classes to some extent merge into one
another in an idealised type defined by such epithets as
wlonc and hwitloccedu. Riddle 80 ("Horn") is a good example of the presentation of this type:

\[
\text{Cwen mec hwilum} \\
\text{hwitloccedu hond on legeð,} \\
\text{eorles dohtor, ðæah hio æpelu sy.} \\
\text{(11. 3b-5)}
\]

The queen in these lines is introduced so that the subject of the riddle, the horn, may partake of her dignity and aristocracy. Riddle 14, which has the same solution, likewise refers to a beaghroden maiden filling the horn (11. 9-10a). Riddle 25 ("Onion") speaks of a "ful cyrtenu ceorles dohtor, / modwlonc meowle" (11. 6-7a), and Riddle 45 ("Dough") describes a woman as hygewlonc and "þeodnes dohtor" (1. 5). The hen of Riddle 42 ("Cock and Hen") is personified as hwitloc and wlanc (11. 3-4). As mentioned in the previous chapter, the existence of a contrasting type, a dark-haired menial, contemptuously described, is suggested by a couple of references to a "wonfeax Wale" (Riddle 12, 1. 8; Riddle 52, 1. 6).  

A number of the riddles in which women appear contain an obscene double-entendre: Riddles 25 ("Onion"), 44 ("Key"), 45 ("Dough"), 54 ("Churn"), 61 ("Helmet"), 62 ("Boring Tool"), and 63 ("Cup"). These riddles are interesting in that they are the only places in Old English poetry which deal directly with sexual relations. However, there is no more real characterisation here than in any other of the Riddles. The obscene riddles give a fairly mechanical account of sexual union, and their point lies
in the humorous contrast between their respectable solutions and their (usually much more obvious) obscene implications.

All in all, the Riddles give us glimpses of the role assigned to women. They are seen to be an integral part, but a distinctly minor part, of the social milieu presented in the Riddles. Often they are little more than part of the furniture. The descriptions of women are not only incidental, but are completely external, and are reduced to a very few, standard features. The figures of aristocratic women lend grace to the life of the hall. On a coarser level, women described by similar epithets are found as sexual objects in the obscene riddles. And there are two scanty references to female slaves, again, serving as props in the scenery, rather than playing a central role. In all these categories, the female figure is presented in a very functional way, and her function is that of an accessory to the male world.

Like the Riddles, the Maxims present women briefly, externally, and in terms of their social functions. Both Maxims I and Maxims II are very loose structurally. They present a series of vignettes linked together by the associations arising from alliteration and word connotation rather than by logical sequence. In Maxims II the successive images are very brief, often confined to a single half-line. A laconic comment on woman's social role is introduced quite casually, via the free association which is the poet's method of working. He refers to the
rain-storm, stirred up with wind, which descends on the world (one of the typical natural phenomena of which the poem is full), speaks of the thief, whose nature it is to go about "in dark weathers," a concept which relates to the storm, mentions the giant that dwells in solitude in the fen, and then states:

Ides sceal dyrne cæfte, fæmne, hire freond gesecean, gif heo nelle on folce gepeon þæt hi man beagum gebicge.

(11. 43b-45a)

Evidently, the woman who does not desire the normal arranged marriage, who does not wish "to be bought with rings," is a social outcast. She seeks her lover secretly like the thief who goes in darkness; she is wretched, monstrous, and set apart like the giant who lives in the fen.12

Structurally, Maxims I is even weaker than Maxims II. It is awkward and jerky, and ends abruptly and inconsequentially. However, it does give greater expansion to its gnomic themes. The extended definition of the virtuous queen cited in the previous chapter occurs in Maxims I. Here, the traditional qualities found scattered elsewhere are brought together as the poet delineates the queen's relationship to husband and retainers. The passage presents more elaborately the kind of gnomic definition of the fitting which is found more tersely expressed elsewhere. In another part of the poem, the poet includes "sinc on cwene" (l. 126) and "sceal bryde
beag" (l. 130) in a list of various sets of things which belong together. The gnomic poetry sets down in the form of a statement the kinds of features presented appositively in the Riddles.  

The most elemental role of both man and woman appears in lines 23b-25a:

\[
\text{Tu beoð gemæccan;} \\
\text{sceal wif ond wer in worulđ cennan} \\
\text{bearn mid gebyrdum.}
\]

Marriage and childbirth are juxtaposed with loss and death as the poet describes how the tree must lose its leaves and mourn its branches (ll. 25b-26), and the fated man must die (l. 27). Here the gnomes are concerned with the natural order at its most rudimentary.

More specifically, the poet, like the author of Maxims II, touches on the contrast between the chaste and the unchaste woman:

\[
\text{widgongel wif word gespringeð, oft hy mon wommum bilihð, hælæð hy hospe mænað, oft hyre hleor abreopeð.}
\]

(11. 64-65)

The aura of disgrace that surrounds the "widgongel wif" is captured quite vividly here. Further on, the poet returns, more feebly, to the same theme: "Wif sceal wip wer waere gehealdan, oft hi mon wommum belihð" (l. 100).

The picture of women which emerges from Maxims I and Maxims II has affinities with that to be found in the Old Icelandic Havamal, "The Sayings of Har" ("Har" being Odin). Havamal, a collection of proverbial sayings much like the Old English gnomes, is the second poem in the
collection which constitutes the Poetic Edda, a group of poems of which the first half are on mythological and the second on heroic subjects. The poems as a whole are of pagan origin. Like the Old English gnomic poems, Havamal is loose and composite in structure. Further, the rather mundane and practical attitude to women found in Maxims I and II is paralleled in Havamal, with the difference that in the latter poem the presentation of women becomes humorous and cynical. The relationship between men and women is here an ongoing battle of the sexes, in which men often get the worst of the encounter:

Many a good maid, if you mark it well,
is fickle, though fair her word;
that I quickly found when the cunning maid
I lured to lecherous love;
every taunt and gibe she tried on me,
and naught I had of her.  
(stanza 102)

and:

A man I saw sorely bested
through a wicked woman's words;
her baleful tongue did work his bane,
though good and unguilty he was.  
(stanza 118)

This rather harsh picture is somewhat mitigated later:

if thee list to gain a good woman's love
and all the bliss there be,
thy troth shalt pledge, and truly keep:
no one tires of the good he gets.
(stanza 130)

Although Havamal presents a world-view in many ways very akin to that of Old English poetry, as apparent, for instance in the well known stanzas on the transitoriness of worldly things and the need to win fame, the
proverbial treatment of women in this poem makes them much more formidable and spirited creatures than the female figures in the Old English *Maxims* and Riddles.

The note of cynicism which characterises *Havamal* is absent from Old English poetry; the references to unchaste women in the *Maxims* are the closest approximation to it. There is one rather striking passage in *Maxims I* which is the reverse of cynical: the little anecdote about the Frisian wife. This passage provides a vivid crystallisation of the theme of wifely duty expressed in general terms in other parts of the poem. The lines describe how the Frisian wife receives "the welcome one" (l. 94)—her sailor husband—and leads him in, washes his clothes and gives him clean ones to wear. The language is fresh and precise, and the words suggest a touching affection on both sides: "bip his ceol cumen ond hyre ceorl to ham, / agen ætgeofa" (11. 96-97a), and "lip him on londe pæs his lufu bædeð" (l. 99).

*Maxims I* is on the whole an inferior poem: badly organised, and often trite. But many of its vignettes are vivid, and the Frisian wife passage is especially so. The marital relationship is only one of many themes in the poem, but it particularly captures the poet's interest. Aspects of this theme appear and disappear, interspersed with other material. The poet refers to the elemental relationship of man, wife, and children, speaks of the king's buying the queen with rings and goes on to describe
their married life in ideal terms, and touches on situations in which the rules have been broken and the ideal vitiated. The Frisian wife passage is the high point in the treatment of this theme. The poet's development of his subject is sporadic and disorganised, but it contains moments of real imagination and sensitivity.

The Riddles and Maxims show a traditional view of women which is also present in Beowulf. But, before we turn to the more substantial characterisation to be found in that poem, it is worth looking at another piece of Old English poetry which appears to draw on the traditional literary view of woman's role. This work is Waldere, a poem which is extant only in two small fragments. Hence, statements about its intentions are necessarily speculative. However, the poem is evidently based on material known to us from other sources, chiefly, the Icelandic Thidrik Saga, various Middle High German poems, and, most important, the Latin epic Waltharius, usually ascribed to the tenth-century Ekkehard I of St. Gall. In its basic form, the tale describes the escape of Walther and his beloved, Hildegund, from the court of Attila, where they were held as hostages. On their way they are ambushed in a defile in the Vosges, and Walther is involved in a bitter fight with King Gunther and twelve companions, of whom all except Gunther and his friend Hagen (also a friend and fellow hostage of Walther), are killed by Walther, the three survivors all being severely injured before they
finally make peace. The Waldere fragments belong to the occasion of the final struggle between Walther and his two opponents.

Fragment I, a speech encouraging Waldere before the fight, is generally assigned to Hildegund. The speaker is unnamed, but, from our external knowledge of the tale, Hildegund seems the likely candidate. Hildegund in this passage has been regarded as a martial heroine, whetting Waldere's possibly flagging resolve. However, as Levin Schucking pointed out, her words constitute not so much a "whetting" as a piece of good advice. Her urging Waldere to perform "good deeds" (l. 23) and win glory (ll. 10-11) is a standard piece of good counsel. Her function in the passage, Schucking notes, is to be linked with that of the trusty retainer (he cites Wiglaf's urging Beowulf to fight well against the dragon), and with that of the dutiful wife (he compares the queen in Maxims I and Wealhtheow in Beowulf): both are expected to give sound advice. Hildegund, then, exercises the same supportive function that we found attached to women in the Old English proverbial poems. However, it cannot be denied that the poet gives her, if she is indeed the speaker, the same kind of powerful eloquence that we find in Wiglaf, and in the retainers in Maldon:

[...] is se dæg cumen
pøet ðu scealt aninga ọđer twega,
ilf forleosan ọđo e[...]gne dom
agan mid eldum, Ælfheres sunu.
(Waldere, I, 11. 8-11)
The portrayal of Hildegund in *Waldere* may be contrasted with her characterisation in *Waltharius*, where she is excessively deferential and timid:

Tandem virgo viri genibus curvata profatur:  
'Ad quaecumque vocas, mi domne, sequar studiose  
Nec quicquam placitis malim praeponere iussis.'  
(11. 248-50)

and:

In tantumque timor muliebra pectora pulsat,  
Horreat ut cunctos aurae ventique susurros,  
Formidans volucres collisos sive racemos.  
(11. 351-53)

Ekkehard's poem is influenced by classical Latin poetry, and by Virgil in particular. In comparing *Waldere* with its Latin analogue, it is tempting to make a neat antithesis between northern and southern European traditions, arguing that the Old English version offers us a fierce, Valkyrie-like character, and the Latin a much gentler figure. But the difference is rather between a vigorously practical and an effusively sentimental presentation, and is much influenced by the difference in poetic quality between the two works: *Waldere* is full of spontaneity; *Waltharius* reads like a school exercise in pastiche.

The Old English Hildegund, then, does not depart from the role of dutiful accessory which typically characterised wives and queens in the Riddles and *Maxims*. However, she does invest this role with considerably more vigour. More than this cannot be said, since the *Waldere* fragments are too brief for us to come to any conclusions about the larger artistic purpose the poet may have had.
and a question mark must be attached to the very ascription of Fragment I to Hildegund.

Both the Riddles and the **Maxims** present female figures cursorily, and in the conventional terms defined by the traditional roles of women in society. The female figures in *Beowulf* are evidently indebted to the same tradition. With the exception of the arrogant Thryth and the monstrous mother of Grendel, all the women in the poem who are characterised at all extensively are beautiful and virtuous queens based on the ideal described in **Maxims** I. There are a couple of references to older women (the word used is *geomeowle*): the wife of the fierce old Ongentheow, and the woman who laments beside the pyre of Beowulf. However, these figures are given no distinguishing features specifically connected with their age. Their function is the standard, accessory one: here, to convey helplessness or grief when their protecting warrior is dead. Ongentheow's wife is "golde berofene" (l. 2931); the woman at Beowulf's pyre sings a *giomorgyd* (l. 3150), and anticipates wretchedness and captivity for herself and her people. These two old women are in exactly the same position as the (typical and hypothetical) "mægð scyne" (l. 3016) in the speech of the messenger who announces Beowulf's death. The young women of the tribe, says the messenger, will have to go sadly, "golde bereafod" (l. 3018) into exile.

Yet, the *Beowulf* poet very skilfully manages to use
the female figures of the poem as the chief vehicle of its tragic effect. In Maxims I, an interest in the marital relationship as the expression of an elemental propriety crystallises in a particular instance of this relationship: the Frisian wife scene. The effect is vivid, but isolated. The Beowulf poet also brings the conventions to life. In him the effect is less particularised, but more sustained. The pathetic figure of the female victim of feud becomes a leitmotiv in the poem. The women mentioned in the previous paragraph are nameless and typical, but their case is repeated in the three central, parallel women characters of the poem: Wealhtheow, Hildeburh, and Freawaru. These three figures are presented quite briefly, and in a manner which suggests that they are still tied to the limited number of features associated with idealised women in the Riddles and Maxims. It is a considerable achievement of the Beowulf poet that he is able to subordinate these conventional figures to the specific ends of his poem, and to draw upon the type of the proud and beautiful queen, which we saw as merely a part of the background in the Riddles, for a major source of the poem's tragic impact.

Both the proverbial poems and Beowulf utilise the typical roles assigned to women by society. The Maxims speak of buying a wife and refer to her domestic duties. This suggests the same view of women as the early laws. Beowulf gives a picture of the ceremonious functions of
the aristocratic woman which corresponds to the indications of other historical sources that queens in secular life were prominent but, as a rule, essentially inactive. But the significant difference between the Riddles and Maxims on one hand and Beowulf on the other is that the latter poem does much more than simply reflect, in a rather conservative way, certain recurrent features of real life. The Beowulf poet uses the recurrent and typical, but he shapes it to serve a distinctive end.

In Beowulf, Wealhtheow, Hildeburh, and Freawaru are each the centre of a tragic feud. In each case, the story is presented allusively, as something with which the Anglo-Saxon audience would have been familiar. For the modern reader, the facts of the case have to be pieced together with the aid of external evidence and some guesswork. Hrothgar's queen, Wealhtheow, and their daughter, Freawaru, are semi-historical figures and the events associated with them are treated by Scandinavian sources, notably the Gesta Danorum of the twelfth-century Danish historian, Saxo Grammaticus, and the fourteenth-century Hrolfssaga Kraka. Hildeburh is a more shadowy figure, but the Finnsburh episode in which she plays a part is substantiated by The Fight at Finnsburh, a fragmentary Old English lay which describes the same events.

We know from Saxo that Hrothgar's nephew, Hrothulf, killed Hrethric, Hrothgar's son. Hrothulf's subsequent
splendid reign is remembered in Danish tradition, and celebrated in the *Hrolfssaga*. The *Beowulf* poet makes no explicit statement about these later events, but, in the light of the information provided by Scandinavian sources, we can tell that Wealhtheow's expression of her faith in Hrothulf (ll. 1180b-87) is a piece of ironic foreshadowing. An allusion to Hrothulf's subsequent revolt and usurpation is also present in the poet's earlier statement about uncle and nephew: "þa gyt wæs hiera sib ætgæedere, / æghwylc oðrum trywe" (ll. 1164b-65a). As for Freawaru, the poet makes Beowulf predict that her marriage to Ingeld of the Heathobards will not prevent disaster, when feud breaks out between the Danes and the Heathobards again. Saxo includes an account of this episode which preserves its characteristic details and gives names corresponding to those of Ingeld and his father, Froda, although the identity of the tribes is different.

The outlines of all three stories can be deduced sufficiently for us to grasp the poet's tragic intentions, although many problems remain unsolved. Evidently, the author of *Beowulf* intended to point a parallel between the fates of the three women. Freawaru is given in marriage as a "peaceweaver," and it seems highly likely, from the tragic battle between Hildeburh's brother and husband, that she too had been sent as a peaceweaver, to settle the feud between two tribes. It may be that Wealhtheow
herself was given in marriage for the same purpose. The literal translation of her name is "foreign servant," which suggests that the poet may have given her this name to indicate her foreign origins and hint that her own marriage was arranged to cement a precarious friendship between races. Certainly, all these women, Wealhtheow, Hildeburh, and Freawaru, have strong interest in preserving a peace which is finally broken in spite of them, although in Wealhtheow's case the conflict is familial, not inter-tribal.

The Beowulf poet describes the situation of each of these women in such a way as to suggest their inter-relationship. References to their tragic destiny all have a starting point in a scene of feasting in Hrothgar's hall, Heorot. Hildeburh and Freawaru are both linked to Wealhtheow by this device. And there is a natural association between the last two women because Freawaru is Wealhtheow's daughter. After Beowulf's victory over Grendel, there is celebration in Heorot, and the scop sings the tale of Finnsburh. He tells of the battle between Hnæf, leader of the Half-Danes (or simply 'Danes') and Finn, king of the Frisians and Hildeburh's husband, the death of Hnæf and compact between the survivors on both sides, the uneasy truce, and the final vengeance of Hengest, Hnæf's second-in-command, who leads his men to defeat the Frisians, kill Finn, and carry Hildeburh back to Denmark. When the tale is ended,
Wealhtheow comes forth, greets her husband in a formal speech, and then turns to Beowulf with gifts and gracious words. In her speech to Hrothgar, she mentions her confidence that Hrothulf will be loyal to her sons, and when speaking to Beowulf requests that he will be kind to them. As W. W. Lawrence noted,

the story of Queen Hildeburh . . . [is] designedly brought into connection with the tragedy in store for Queen Wealhtheow, which must have been well-known to the people for whom the Beowulf poet wrote.\textsuperscript{30}

Later in the poem, when, for the benefit of Hygelac, Beowulf is recapitulating his adventures in Denmark, mention is made of Wealhtheow's daughter, Freawaru. Beowulf is speaking of his initial reception at Heorot, an occasion of festivity very like the great banquet after Grendel's defeat. Beowulf notes Wealhtheow's prominence in the scene, and this especially suggests to us a parallel with the other occasion. He comments that Wealhtheow's daughter was also present, serving drink to the warriors in the hall; he goes on to mention the girl's name and her betrothal to Ingeld, and predicts a sad end to the peace-making match (ll. 2020 ff.).

Thus, the three queens are parallel figures, each doomed to a tragic fate. Mention of Hildeburh in close proximity to Wealhtheow suggests the connection between the two. Also, both the Finnsburh and the Heathobard episodes are closely associated with scenes of feasting: the former is narrated at a feast; the latter arises out
of recollection of a feast and describes the outbreak of hostility at a (subsequent) feast. The allusion to Wealhtheow's future fate likewise takes place at a scene of feasting. In all these cases, there is a pointed contrast between the conviviality of feasting and the horror of war. The juxtaposition of the two casts a dark shadow on the joy over Beowulf's defeat of Grendel.

Throughout the optimism of this part of the poem, there is the implication that the mirth of the hall is to be destroyed by the violent passions of men, just as the "peaceweaving" queens are to become helpless victims of war.

The Beowulf poet's allusive method means that the details of the stories to which he refers are unclear. He shows a greater interest in character and situation than in event. Indeed, it may well be that the legends themselves were variable and indistinct. But the poet gives sufficient material to make his effect. Whatever the exact circumstances associated with the fight at Finnsburh, the usurpation of Hrothulf, and the flaring up of the Heathobard feud, the situations of the three queens are unmistakably tragic. These three figures underline a major theme in the poem: that security is a temporary thing. The main character is doomed, he is surrounded by tragic episodes, Heorot itself is to perish in flames (ll. 82 ff.), and the feast at which Wealhtheow speaks and Hildeburh's tale is told is itself an occasion of false
security, for Grendel's mother is about to strike. The poet's allusive technique is designed to highlight the feelings of the actors in his drama, and also to bring out the irony of their situations. His method of indirection is especially suited to the latter aim, and the three parallel women figures are the main vehicle for it.

Of the three women, Wealhtheow is the most fully treated. She is endowed with the conventional attributes of grace and courtesy; she is an ornament to the hall. But, although the Beowulf poet presents her in the conventional way, he suggests deeper qualities in her. Wealhtheow, who cannot act to change events, uses eloquence and courtesy in an attempt to make the realities of her situation coincide with her wishes. She, the peacemaker, is the embodiment of all that is best in the life of Heorot: gentleness, refinement, the arts of civilisation. But behind all this is the ever-present pressure of violence, baseness, and greed. In her speeches she tries to blot out these threatening forces with her own charm and goodwill. "Ic minne can / glædne Hroþulf," she says (ll. 1180b-81a), and "Her is æghwylc eorl oprum getrywe" (l. 1228). She stresses that she is sure Hrothulf will be loyal to her two young sons (Hrethric and Hrothmund) if Hrothgar dies before him (which, in view of Hrothgar's old age, is only to be expected). And yet, she finds it necessary to appeal to Beowulf for protection and to promise him reward:
Wes þenden þu lifige,  
æþeling, eadig.  Ìc þe an tela  
sингестреона.  Ìo þu suna minum  
þæðum gedefæ,  dreamhealdende.  
(11. 1224b-27)

In her speeches to Hrothgar (11. 1169-87) and Beowulf (11. 1216-31), her anxiety for her sons, her appeal to Beowulf on their behalf, and her disguised appeal to Hrothulf find expression in wishful statements that present what should be as what is. 32

Even Wealhtheow's traditional functions in the hall take on an added significance in the Beowulf poet's treatment. Her first appearance gives us little more than a lengthier version of the standard queen-in-hall motif. She comes forward formally, presents the cup to Hrothgar and bids him be blithe (1. 617), and then takes it to the retainers in turn. When she comes to Beowulf, she addresses him courteously, he assures her that he will be victorious in his encounter with Grendel or die in the attempt, and she returns to her seat, well-pleased. At the great banquet celebrating Grendel's defeat, Wealhtheow goes through the same ritual gestures, but now the whole scene is charged with the tragic reminder of Hildeburh and with the foreshadowing of Wealhtheow's own domestic tragedy. Once again, Wealhtheow makes her formal entry, hands Hrothgar the cup and wishes him happiness, and proceeds to make courteous speeches in the presence of the company. A profound irony and pathos underlies it all. The poet has brought to life the static figure of the gracious queen,
who comes forward in the hall, offers the cup to her lord, and utters wise and courteous words. He has given Wealhtheow fears and strivings, and at the same time underlined the essential hopelessness of her position. Wealhtheow is the adornment of the hall, but she is powerless to affect the course of events. All she can do is make the same formal movements. Like the queen in *Maxims I* who has wise counsel for her husband and his retainers, she utters fitting statements, but really they are only pious hopes which will come to nothing. The audience knows that fate and human nature will see to that.

Whereas Wealhtheow's tragedy is implied only, that of Hildesburh is quite explicit. The poet's account of the Finnsburgh feud begins and ends with her, and she is seen as the main sufferer. The peculiar tragedy of her position is that she is guiltless (l. 1072), and yet she must suffer doubly because she has loyalties to both sides and feels for the deaths on both sides, especially those of her son and brother. We do not know exactly how the Heorot scop presented the tale, but the *Beowulf* poet skips over events in order to concentrate on certain moments. Initially, he presents Hildesburh grieving on the morning after the battle. Guiltless (*unsynnum*), she was deprived of son and brother (11. 1072b-74a). She finds slaughter where once she held her greatest joy (11. 1079-80a). The ironic opening, saying she had no need to praise the faith
of the Jutes (Eotena, l. 1072), suggests a concentrated bitterness against those who are responsible for her misery. All Hildeburh can do is feel and give utterance to her feelings. She can change nothing. Nor, like Hengest, can she take vengeance. "Þæt wæs geomuru ides!" says the poet (l. 1075), as he says "Þæt wæs god cyning!" (ll. 11 and 863) as if geomoru defined the very sum and essence of Hildeburh. Innocent, helpless, doubly deprived, swept overnight from happiness to misery, she is the exemplification of the cruelty and wastefulness of feud. The poet dwells on the agonising frustration of Hengest as all the winter he broods on revenge; but Hildeburh is a more poignant figure, and we see her again at the end of the episode, still helpless and hapless, finally carried back to Denmark by her people.

Freawaru is the most briefly mentioned of the three parallel female figures. Like Wealhtheow, she is first presented to us as the conventional noblewoman who carries the cup to the retainers in the hall (ll. 2020-23a). After Beowulf has casually mentioned her in this context, he goes on to explain that she is betrothed to the son of Froda, and that Hrothgar hopes "þæt he mid ðy wife wælfæhða dæl, / sæcca gesette" (ll. 2028b-29a), but that there is every possibility of feud breaking out again, as it usually does "þeah seo bryd duge" (l. 2031). Beowulf then predicts the way in which war will break out again: an old Heathobard warrior, incensed by seeing the weapons
of his slain kinsmen publicly worn by Freawaru's followers, will egg on his young companion time and again, until, inevitably, fighting breaks out. Here the focus shifts from Freawaru; but, lest we should forget her, she is alluded to again at the end of the episode, as Hildeburh was:

\[
\text{weallað wælniðas,} \quad \text{ond him wiflufan}
\]
\[
\text{æfter cearwælum} \quad \text{colran weordæð.}
\]

(11. 2064a-66)

The love inspired by Freawaru is a slight thing in comparison with the claims of tribal feeling and tribal enmity. In pitting her beneficent but fragile influence in the arena of male violence and faction, she is a parallel to Wealththeow and to Hildeburh. Her connection with them allows her to share the same tragic aura although she is mentioned so cursorily, and Beowulf's laconic "peah seo bryd duge" is enough to bring a ready-made complex of feelings into play. Freawaru, like the queens who have been described before her, is a mere object swept up in the course of men's intrigues, as helpless as Hildeburh, who, when the Danes have finally avenged themselves, is carried back to Denmark along with the captured treasure and gems (ll. 1154-59a).

The Beowulf poet uses the figures of these three women to build up an atmosphere of tragedy in the first half of the poem. It is through them in particular that he conveys the terrible effects of feud. These women are
not individualised, but the suffering of Hildeburh and
the anxiety of Wealhtheow are poignantly suggested.
Freawaru is scarcely developed as a character, but she too
is full of pathos. The poet has been able to exploit the
conventional, static figure, and use its very passivity
and formality as a vehicle of tragic irony.

The treatment of women in Beowulf is very different
from that in what might be thought culturally comparable
works: the heroic poems of the Poetic Edda. Although both
Beowulf and the Icelandic poems draw on the fund of
Germanic legend and myth, the atmosphere of the Edda is
far more violent and passionate. Whereas Beowulf
essentially repudiates feud, the Eddic poems, though
instinct with the tragedy of it, suggest no criticism: it
is inevitable, even noble. Thus, while the Beowulf
queens are peaceweavers, their Norse counterparts are instigators
of and participants in acts of violence. Brynhild stirs up
Gunnar and Hogni to kill Sigurth, her beloved, and enjoys
a bitter triumph when she hears the lamentation of Guthrun,
Sigurth's wife:

Laughed then Brynhild, Buthli's daughter,
one time only, out of inmost heart,
on her couch when came to her ears
the grievous wailing of Gjuki's daughter.
(The Short Lay of Sigurth, stanza 30)

Later, Guthrun too wins a bitter revenge. Her second
husband, Atli, has killed her two brothers, Gunnar and
Hogni; Guthrun serves Atli a dish made of the hearts of
their sons, whom she has killed, and, after telling him
what she has done, burns him and his men—and herself—to death in their hall. Her dreadful triumph is presented with a stark power:

Rose uproar on benches, men's angry shouts, wept Hunnish warriors, there was wailing 'neath hangings; but one wept not—Guthrun, who wept not ever her bearhearted brothers, nor her boys so dear, so young and so guileless, begot with Atli.

(Atlakviða, stanza 41)  

The tragedy associated with these terrible women is totally different in quality from that created by the gentle peaceweavers in Beowulf. In the sagas, too, women appear as instigators, rather than victims of feud. In fact, Guthrun in Laxdaela Saga, who loves Kjartan, and, thinking he has deserted her, marries another man and then, when Kjartan himself marries, instigates his slaying, is probably based on the figure of Brynhild in the Eddic poems.

Although Beowulf is a Germanic poem, it is closer in spirit to Virgil than to the Edda. There is no substantial evidence that the author of Beowulf was directly influenced by the Aeneid, but both poems show the same kind of humanity. The resemblance is one of poetic temper, rather than superficial form, like that between Ekkehard's Waltharius and Virgil. In Beowulf, it is not the zeal of battle that inspires the poet's most moving effects, but its ultimate futility, its irony in punishing most those who have least part in it. One is reminded of the spear of the slain Troilus scribbling in
the dust, or the terrified Rutuli forcing their gates shut against their fleeing comrades. Both poets have a profound sense of the irony and pathos of war. The author of Beowulf has found in the type of the noblewoman, the idealised figure who embodies the most peaceful and civilised aspects of heroic life, the most effective means by which to convey the threats to that life. Through the tragic fates—stated or implied—of Hildeburh, Wealtheow, and Freawaru, he builds up a sense of doom in the first half of the poem which provides a counterpoise to the successes of Beowulf and foreshadows the tragedy at the poem's end.
Footnotes

1 Beowulf is generally dated around 700, or shortly after. See Klaeber, edition, pp. cvii-cxiii. However, Whitelock, in her book The Audience of Beowulf (Oxford, 1951), argues for a later date. It is very unlikely that the poem, which shows such a sympathetic interest in Danish history, was composed after the onset of the Danish invasions, which began at the end of the eighth century.


3 The dating of the Maxims is uncertain. Blanche Colton Williams vaguely suggests an eighth- or ninth-century date for Maxims I and appears to indicate the same for Maxims II, Gnomic Poetry in Anglo-Saxon (New York, 1914), pp. 101-02 and 112-13 respectively. Krapp and Dobbie more tentatively suggest the tenth century, or possibly earlier, Exeter Book, p. xlvii (Maxims I), and The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems, ed. Dobbie, ASPR, 6 (New York, 1942), p. lxvii (Maxims II). However, Krapp and Dobbie allow that the gnomic poems may incorporate earlier elements, Exeter Book, pp. xlv-xlvi, and Minor Poems, pp. lxvi-lxvii. Maxims I contains what looks like a reference to cremation, i.e., to a funeral in the pagan style: "holen sceal inæaled, yrfe gedæled deades monnes." (11. 79-80a) Such a reference is an argument for the antiquity of the traditional gnomes in these poems.

4 Some, at least, of the Old English Riddles date back to this period. Riddle 35 ("Coat of Mail") is extant in an early Northumbrian version, the Leiden Riddle. Three series of Anglo-Latin riddles are preserved, those of Aldhelm, Tatwine, and Eusebius. See Exeter Book, p. lxvi. A much more extended survey of the collections of early medieval Latin riddles from Symphosius on is contained in F. Tupper's edition, The Riddles of the Exeter Book (Boston, 1910), Introduction, pp. xxviii-li.

5 Maxims I, 1. 71.

6 I avoid going into the question of variant solutions. All the poems specified by now have solutions which are well-established, if not universally accepted. Many of the Riddles are far from transparent.
Cf. Riddle 55, l. 1; Riddle 56, l. 11; Riddle 59, l. 1; Riddle 63, l. 3; Riddle 67, l. 14.

This riddle has an obscene significance.

Both of these riddles have obscene implications.

In Riddle 52 the form is wonfah.

Cf. R. MacGregor Dawson, who attempts a, rather modest, vindication of the poems' structure, likening it, rather inconsistently on the one hand to "stream-of-consciousness" novels, and on the other hand to casual conversation. In the latter regard, Dawson comments, "The result is the same—a rambling style which covers a great deal of ground, yet never reaches any particular goal. This is not, perhaps, a good pattern for a poem, but it is an adequate one . . . ." In my own opinion, such a pattern is definitely an inadequate one. See Dawson, "The Structure of the Old English Gnomic Poems," JEGP, 61 (1962), 14-22.

The interpretation of ll. 43b-45a is disputed. See Minor Poems, p. 176. In addition to the overt meaning, as I understand it, there is the implication that the woman who takes a lover has no hope of getting married. One is reminded of the references to buying a wife in the early laws, which make it clear that the bride's chastity is an important part of the bargain. However, Blanche Colton Williams believes that this passage in Maxims I refers to women's use of magical charms ("dyrne cæfte") to secure a husband, Gnomic Poetry, p. 150. Williams' interpretation involves reading wille for nelle (l. 44).


Taylor, quoting from Stanley B. Greenfield, comments on this passage from Maxims I as a mingling of the human and the natural worlds.

The poems are preserved in the MS Codex Regius No. 2365, dating from the thirteenth century. See The Poetic Edda, trans. Lee M. Hollander, 2nd ed. (Austin, 1962), Introduction, p. xiv. Quotations from the Edda are taken from Hollander's translation. The individual poems are older than the extant manuscript, and of various dates. Havamal may go back to the tenth century. See Hollander, p. 14.

Havamal, stanzas 76-77. This is a typically
Germanic attitude which frequently appears in Old English poetry.

It may well be that this passage, which is not gnomic and general, but individual and particular, originally derives from another source. Also, the movement of the verse here is more varied and free-flowing than elsewhere in Maxims I. The passage may well be later in origin than the traditional gnomes, but it is quite consonant with them, and the poet makes significant use of it as the central expression of a recurrent theme in the poem.

Editors have been most tentative about dating Waldere, but it is usually assigned to the early period. Dobbie suggests the eighth century, Minor Poems, p. xxvi, and F. Norman, the middle of the eighth century at the earliest, Waldere (London, 1933), Introduction, p. 23.


It has been suggested that the speaker is Hagen, but this view has received very little support. See Norman, p. 13.

"Waldere und Waltharius," ESt, 60 (1926-26), 24.

Schücking's arguments are designed to counter the view of Hildegund in Waldere as a "Schildjungfrau" in contrast to the timid woman presented in Waltharius. He suggests that Waldere is a tenth-century poem based on the Latin epic, but can bring forward no real evidence in support of this theory, which has been rejected by most scholars. However, his observations about the relationship of Hildegund to the typical retainer or the typical wife are convincing.

The manuscript is damaged in the second case. Klaeber reads "g(e0)meowle"; Dobbie "[Ge]at[isc] meowle" (l. 3150), Beowulf and Judith, ASPR, 4.

It has been suggested that this woman is Beowulf's widow, but, as no wife has been mentioned before, this is neither especially likely nor necessary. See Klaeber, p. 230.

The relevant passages from the analogues to Beowulf, mainly Scandinavian, are quoted in Part II of R. W. Chambers' Beowulf: An Introduction, 3rd ed. (Cambridge,
These episodes from Danish history are alluded to among the catalogues of kings and tribes in Widsith. This poem contains a reference to the good relationship between Hrothgar and Hrothulf, and the very emphasis on their amity may contain a hint at future treachery. The Widsith passage also mentions their joint defeat of the Heathobards. This seems to refer to the outbreak of hostilities which the marriage of Freawaru to Ingeld was designed to prevent:

"Hropwulf ond Hroðgar heoldon lengest
sibbe ætsomne suhtorfæдрan,
sippan hy forwræcon wicinga cynn
ond Ingeldes ord forbigdan,
forheowan æt Heorote Heaðobeadna þrym."
(11. 45-49)

This is a term applied by scholars to women married in order to settle feuds. The Beowulf poet uses the Old English equivalent as an epithet defining the role of noble ladies. Cf. freocSwæbbe, l. 1942 (used ironically in the Thryth episode) and "friðusibb folca." l. 2017 applied to Wealhtheow). Evidently, peace-making is regarded as part of their definitive function.

Cf. Klaeber, edition, p. xxxiii. E. V. Gordon thinks that the first element has been misunderstood, and originally meant "chosen," "Wealhþeow and Related Names," MÆ, 4 (1935), 169-75. Both Klaeber and Gordon note that the "servant" element should not be taken here as a designation of a member of the lower class.

Willy Meyer argues for a similarly close connection between Wealhþeow and Hildeburh, and believes that the former is the daughter of the latter, but the evidence does not justify such a conclusion. See "Wealhþeow," Beiblatt zur Anglia, 33 (1922), 94-101.


The artistic usage of the Finnsburh and Heathobard episodes, their relation to Wealhtew, and to the more central concerns of the poem is well presented by Adrien Bonjour, The Digressions in Beowulf, Medium Ævum Monographs, 5 (Oxford, 1950). The postulated outlines of the legends involved and the discrepant interpretations are discussed by Chambers in his Introduction and Klaeber in his edition. Although most scholars accept that the Beowulf poet is making heavy allusions to a tragic future, Kenneth Sisam is sceptical. He suggests that there is no real basis on which to construct a tragic fate for Wealhtew, and that Beowulf scholars may have created their own legend on the

32 Cf. E. B. Irving, "The only way that Wealhtheow knows to prevent the explosion which seems imminent . . . is to resort to what one must call incantation," A Reading of Beowulf (New Haven and London, 1968), p. 139.

33 This is one of the formal duties of a queen. Cf. Maxims I, 11. 89-91a.

34 The contrast between the style of the Finnsburh episode in Beowulf and the Finnsburh fragment has often been pointed out. Cf. Chambers, "Whereas the Fragment is inspired by the lust and joy of battle, the theme of the Episode, as told in Beowulf, is rather the pity of it all" (p. 248); also Bonjour, "The treatment is . . . more heroic in the Fragment, more 'sentimental' in the episode" (p. 58). Klaeber makes similar observations (edition, p. 236).

35 Literally, "sons and brothers": "bearnnum ond broðrum," l. 1074.

36 The identity of the treacherous Jutes is uncertain. They may be the Danes, the Frisians, or a group having members on both sides. The problem is discussed by Chambers, pp. 272-76, and 333-45. Klaeber simply equates the Jutes with the Frisians in the episode (pp. 233-34), while Chambers regards the Jutes as a distinct group in the service of Finn (p. 276). However, C. L. Wrenn, influenced by his identification of the Beowulf Hengest with the quasi-historical Anglo-Saxon Hengest, equates the Jutes with the Half-Danes, believing the latter to be not Danes proper, but Jutes serving under the Danes, Beowulf, 3rd ed., revised by W. F. Bolton (London, 1973), Introduction, p. 44.

37 Most critics accept that this is a prophetic description of an event which actually occurred, but there is dispute as to whether the scene is in Heorot or in Heathobardic territory. Axel Olrik believed that Beowulf's speech referred to an event which had already taken place, Danmarks Heltedigtning, II (Copenhagen, 1910), pp. 37 ff. See W. W. Lawrence, "Beowulf and the Tragedy of Finnsburg," PMLA, 30 (1915), 380-81, n. 11. A. G. Brodeur argues that the poet deliberately makes Beowulf give a slightly inaccurate account, to indicate that this is prediction only, The Art of Beowulf (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1959), pp. 157-81.

38 Here, as elsewhere, the Beowulf poet is using a conventional idea more pointedly. In Genesis A, the juxtaposition of bryd and beagas is formulaic (cf. "sceal
bryde beag," Maxims I, l. 130), and the association of wife with property, traditional:

"Đa Abraham æhte lædde
of Egypta eðelmearce;
hie ellenrofe idese feredon,
bryd and begas, . . . ."

(ll. 1873-76a)

39 Cf. Bonjour, pp. 62-63, where he speaks of the leitmotiv of the precarious peace in the Finnsburh and Heathobard episodes. He sees these episodes as preparing for the background of feud in the second part of the poem, and paving the way for the tragic atmosphere that becomes insistent there.

40 The same Guðhere and Hagena (Gunther and Hagen) who, in different characters and circumstances, appear in Waldere.

41 Hollander assigns this poem to the eleventh or twelfth century (p. 252). The enormously telling detail of Brynhild's violent laugh is preserved in the later version of the Volsung legend found in the Nibelungenlied.

42 Hollander suggests a date in the latter part of the ninth century (p. 285). The horrible meal served is, of course, an archetypal motif, familiar also from Greek mythology. In the Nibelungenlied, Kriemhild (= Guthrun) is actually responsible for the deaths of Gunther (Gunnar) and Hagen (Hogni); this is her vengeance for their murder of Siegfried (Sigurth).


45 "qui cursu portas primi inrupere patentis,
hos inimica super mixto premit agmine turba,
nec miseram effugiant mortem, sed limine in ipso,
moenibus in patriis atque inter tuta domorum
confixi exspirant animas. pars claudere portas,
nec sociis aperire viam nec moenibus audent
accipere orantis, oriturque miserrima caedes
defendentum armis aditus inque arma ruentum."

(XI, 879-86)
CHAPTER IV

THE POEMS IN THE SAINT'S LIFE TRADITION

In the last chapter, I examined the development of one of the major female character-types: the good queen. Here, I shall be concerned with the other main female stereotype: the saint. Whereas the poetic presentation of the queen utilises the prominent but passive position she typically held in actual life, the saint, as noted in Chapter II, is a type based not so much on the real-life position of Anglo-Saxon saints, such as Hild and Æthelthryth, as on a hypothetical ideal. In the present chapter, the discussion will centre on three Old English poems: Elene, Juliana, and Judith. The first two works are among the signed poems of Cynewulf, and are dated around the turn of the ninth century; Judith is a later work. Since they both deal with Christian saints and were both composed by the same author, Juliana and Elene have more in common with one another than with Judith, which treats an Old-Testament subject. Nonetheless, the latter poem has considerable affinities with them, by virtue of its concentration on the figure of a heroic woman. B. J. Timmer observes that "Judith belongs to the type of poetry to which Juliana and Elene belong, the
religious epic describing the deeds of a fighting saint." Rosemary Woolf has also pointed out the connection between Judith and the saints' lives, observing that this poem "shows unmistakably the influence of the life of the virgin martyr." There are, of course, marked differences between the three poems in source and treatment, but in characterisation the similarity of tradition is more important than the differences. The fact that two of the poems belong to one period and author and the third to another is not of great significance in the present connection. Juliana and Elene do lie closer together in being more firmly within the hagiographic genre, but this has little to do with their particular Anglo-Saxon provenance. As far as scholars have been able to establish distinctive features in the poems attributable to Cynewulf, these have been features of diction and syntax rather than of matter.

The attitude of mind which links Judith with Juliana and Elene is not only present in the Old English poem on the Judith legend, but goes right back to the Hebrew version of the tale. Like the later authors of the saints' lives, the composer of the Old-Testament story aimed to edify and to confirm the faith. The editors of the Jerusalem Bible draw attention to this in their introduction to the apocryphal books:

The author [of the Book of Judith] seems
deliberately to have defied history to distract the reader's attention from the historical context and focus it exclusively on the religious conflict and outcome. . . . Holofernes, the henchman of Nebuchadnezzar, is the incarnation of the powers of evil. Judith (her name means "the Jewess") represents the cause of God, that is to say, of Jewry.  

Clinton Albertson makes rather a similar comment on the frame of mind of the men who wrote the (Latin) lives of Anglo-Saxon saints: "The hagiographers freely manipulate facts and use them only as an excuse to praise God and to instruct and edify men."  

Evidently, there is an inherent similarity between the tale of Judith and those of St. Helena (Elene) and St. Juliana. The attitude behind these tales need not necessarily have involved the conscious falsification of fact imputed in the above comment on the Book of Judith, and not all modern scholars would regard the kind of manipulation referred to by Albertson as an essential ingredient of hagiography. Perhaps the state of mind which informs both the story of Judith and the tales of the Christian saints can be defined as a willingness to accept and promulgate the revelations of the power of God.  

The poems about Helena, Juliana, and Judith are to be set against a background of hagiographic composition, and seen as part of a genre whose features reappear in works written in many different languages and styles, for the saint's life is the product of the universal Christian
culture of Europe in the Middle Ages. The tradition transcends national boundaries, and poems and prose lives are to be found from the Anglo-Saxon period in Latin and Old English, describing the careers of both native and foreign saints. The earliest works, those from the first half of the eighth century, are in Latin. There follows the "Cynewulfian group" of poems. Then, in the late tenth century, at the time of the Benedictine Revival, there is a period of homiletic activity in prose which includes many lives of saints, especially those written by Ælfric.

The traditions of characterisation in the saints' lives are so firmly fixed that some fairly simple generalisations can be made about the genre. These generalisations apply to the three heroines presently under consideration, and also, in a broad sense, to the poetic type of the man of God discussed in Chapter II. The saint is portrayed as a person of pre-eminent virtue which impresses his friends and confounds his enemies. So absolute is his faith that there is little room for fear, doubt, or anxiety. Just as the goodness of the saint is total, so is the malice of the evil persons with whom he must contend. He is confronted with fierce and persistent trials and torments which he scarcely seems to suffer, so complete is his assurance. Proof of his saintliness is given in miracles, which either confirm and assist his followers or frustrate the cruel designs of his persecutors.
Such miracles take place both during his lifetime and, through the power of his relics, after his death. The situations presented by hagiography are painted with sweeping strokes. The contrasts are violent, and the moralising tends to be crude.

In his study of hagiography, R. Aigran distinguishes between the fairly realistic lives based on historical accounts and the 'epic' passions and lives, which are picturesque and rhetorical, and have little or nothing to do with historical fact. Elene and Juliana both belong to this 'epical' category, in contrast, for instance, with the more restrained Anglo-Latin accounts of native saints, such as Cuthbert and Wilfrid. Juliana is a figure of whom only the name and the identification with Nicomedia are likely to be historical. On the basis of these data, preserved in early martyrologies, a suitable legend was developed. Numerous other epical saints' legends, such as that of Katherine of Alexandria, another virgin martyr, grew up in the same way. St. Helena, the mother of Constantine, is only slightly more historical. The legend of her discovery of the cross is a heroic tradition which has the historical basis of a visit by her to the Holy Land, where she founded two churches. Again, the tale of Judith is, to some extent, a Jewish equivalent of epical hagiography.

The contrast between the epical and the more realistic saints' lives can be observed in other Old English
works, both prose and verse, and their Latin sources. The element of crude violence and sensationalism present in many of the Mediterranean legends is absent from the more homely lives of the Anglo-Saxon saints, partly, doubtless, just because they are closer to life than those tales based on Greek and Latin traditions.\textsuperscript{12} Ælfric's lives of Edmund and Oswald, for instance, are more human and less garish than his lives of the Graeco-Roman virgin martyrs: Eugenia, Basillia, Agnes, Agatha, Lucy, and Eufrasia. The \textit{Life of Eugenia}, however, may have had a particular appeal to the Anglo-Saxons, remembering their own saintly abbesses of earlier times: Eugenia lives as a virgin, disguised as a man, in a community of monks, is chosen by them as their abbot, and rules them in exemplary fashion. There is no point at which a line can be drawn between epical and realistic hagiography.\textsuperscript{13} The legend of Guthlac, in the Anglo-Latin life by Felix, in the Old English prose, and in the poetic version, contains some sensational elements, although it is to be grouped with the comparatively realistic accounts of native Anglo-Saxon saints. Thus, the rather picturesque torments to which Guthlac is subjected by bands of devils constitute a motif deriving from the Life of St. Antony, the hermit saint of the desert. Perhaps the most extreme example of the epical tradition in the poetry is the adventures of the saint in \textit{Andreas}, referred to in Chapter II.\textsuperscript{14}
The type of characterisation to be found in the three poems with which I am concerned can be established more precisely by a comparison of the Old English works with their Latin sources. In recent years, there have been several studies of the Old English 'saints' poems' designed to show how these works have shaped their Latin sources in accordance with their own didactic aim. Scholars have pointed out that the Old English poets have sharpened and heightened the moral contrasts in their originals and stylised the characters, to make them clearly representative, not of individuals, but of the Church in its conflict with evil. The stylised presentation has been justified as a deliberate device aimed at a specific end. The overriding didactic aim of the authors of these poems is unquestionable, and their treatment of character reflects this aim. However, the fact that the stylisation is deliberate does not necessarily make it artistically effective. As we shall see, in their adaptation of their sources, the poets make their characters less, not more convincing.

I shall now examine these adaptations one by one, beginning with Judith. The author of this poem has condensed and simplified the Vulgate account in order to bring the contrasting figures of Judith and Holofernes into greater prominence. The beginning of the poem is missing, and there is some dispute as to how much of it is lost. The extant section is trimmed and telescoped in order to
focus upon Judith's venture to the camp of Holofernes, certain characters are omitted, and the poem as we have it gives a balanced and complete narrative. These facts make it likely that very little of the text has been lost. Only two major characters appear in the Old English poet's version of the tale. Nebuchadnezzar has disappeared, and the role of supreme leader of the Assyrians is subsumed in Holofernes. Likewise, Ozias, the leader of the Israelites, is unmentioned, and the poet allows Judith herself to appear as the leader of her people by letting the Israelite commanders and elders drop into the background. Achior, the man who gives Holofernes good but unwelcome advice, is unmentioned, and the little sub-plot describing his transference of loyalties to the Israelites is omitted. Judith's maid is retained, but is not emphasised, and the Assyrian who ventures in to wake the supposedly sleeping Holofernes is a very minor figure. The effect of the Judith poet's alterations is to place the central emphasis on the figure of the heroine as the emblem of virtue and the inspiration of her people.

It is illuminating to compare the poetic treatment of Judith with the treatment of similar subjects in the homilies of Ælfric, especially his Homily on the Book of Judith. There are marked similarities between Ælfric's homily and the poetic Judith, but the restructuring of the original which is so conspicuous in the poem is much less radical in the prose work. Ælfric's narrative is longer
and more leisurely, and also much more faithful to the details of the original. In keeping with the nature of the work he is writing, Ælfric's rendering is also much more explicitly and circumstantially moralistic. The heroine's virtue and piety are stressed, especially in the moralising passage which forms an epilogue to the tale of Judith. Her maintenance of chastity in widowhood is emphasised, and, in her heroic feat, she is likened to the Church striking off the head of the Devil. However, by and large she is a less martial figure than the Judith of the poem, and her actual decapitation of Holofernes is passed over quite briefly. Both the homily and the poem are didactic in intention, but whereas in the former direct moralising takes precedence over narrative and characterisation, in the latter the poet recreates action and character, along traditional poetic lines, as the embodiment of a moral theme. Hence, the poetic treatment takes far greater liberties in its handling of its source.

The exact source of *Juliana* is unknown, but the version of the Juliana legend found in the Bollandist *Acta Sanctorum* provides a form of the legend very close to that on which the Old English poem must have been based. The Latin account describes the torments and temptations to which Juliana is subjected on her refusal to marry a pagan. Her father, Africanus, hands her over to her suitor, Eleusius, who, after failing to break her resolve by initial cruelties, throws her into prison, where she
is visited by a devil. She is subsequently submitted to further tortures, from all of which she emerges unscathed, to effect the discomfiture of Eleusius and the conversion of the multitude. She is finally decapitated. Later her body is conveyed to Campania by a certain Semphonia. Eleusius comes to an ignominious end by shipwreck.

Cynewulf's poem seems to have preserved most of this, although there are two gaps in the manuscript. The first would have contained part of the devil's confession of his crimes, and the second, the account of Eleusius' attempt to break Juliana on the wheel.

The legend of Juliana belongs to a well-defined branch of hagiography: the life of the virgin martyr. It is a category in which the more extravagant features of the genre are very much to the fore. William Strunk, in the Introduction to his edition, gives examples of the recurrent elements:

The typical virgin martyr is a girl of noble rank . . . , devout and learned . . . , sought in marriage by some heathen proconsul or prefect or prefect's son . . . . She rejects her suitor, and refuses to sacrifice to Apollo . . . . Brought before the prefect for trial, she adheres to her faith, whereupon she is subjected to atrocious torture and humiliation.22

Strunk goes on to enumerate the typical tortures from which the saint is miraculously preserved, and the final beheading.

There are some significant differences between the Cynewulf version of the legend and that found in the
Acta Sanctorum. In the latter, Juliana makes the stipulation that Eleusius gain the prefecture before she will consent to marry him. When he overcomes this obstacle, she falls back upon her real reason: her determination not to marry a pagan. The omission of this original stipulation from Cynewulf's poem achieves a greater emphasis on Juliana's piety and makes her seem less dissembling. The same is true of another omission, which has the effect of making the character of Eleusius more absolutely wicked and a greater contrast to Juliana. This is the omission of Eleusius' declaration that he dare not accede to Juliana's demand that he become a Christian, "quia si fecero, audiet imperator, et successorem mihi dans, caput meum gladio amputabit." In Cynewulf's version, Eleusius' attitude is one of complete hostility towards Christianity. Cynewulf also omits the reference to the removal of Juliana's body by Semphonia, a detail which makes no real contribution to the impact of the martyr's passion. The overall effect of these changes is to sharpen and simplify the main lines of the plot and characterisation.

In the case of Elene, as well as Juliana, the Acta Sanctorum provides a version of the legend similar to that which must have been Cynewulf's source. This version is the Acta S. Judae-Quiriaci, which centres on the finding of the cross by the converted Jew, Judas Cyriacus. The narrative comprises three originally separate legends,
going back to the fourth and fifth centuries, and describing respectively Constantine’s victory in battle through the sign of the cross, the mission of his mother, Helena, to find the true cross, and the conversion of Judas, subsequently Cyriacus. Thus, the Latin work is quite loose in structure. Its title suggests that Judas Cyriacus is the hero, but he does not enter till the middle of the narrative, and it is really the cross itself which is the unifying element.

As regards the Old English poem, the title Elene has been in general use since Jacob Grimm used it in his 1840 edition, but perhaps "The Invention of the Cross" would be more appropriate. Clearly, St. Helena is not the central character of Elene in the same way that Juliana and Judith are the heroines of the poems which bear their names. Other figures, i.e., Constantine and Cyriacus, at times occupy the central role. Thus, Constantine carries out the military campaign in the first episode, and it is he, rather than Helena, who fulfils the saint’s function of martial leader at this point. Helena is the war-leader in the central section; but the presentation of her in this capacity is weakened by the fact that she is never called upon to take part in any battles. Again, it is Judas Cyriacus who actually finds the cross and the nails; and at the time when he is being interrogated by Helena he occupies a role rather like that of the martyr before the tribunal. Nevertheless, Helena,
the person who carries out the mission to Jerusalem to find the cross, is a pivotal figure. Cynewulf seems to have heightened her role in order to make her, at least to some extent, the same kind of focal figure as Juliana (or Judith). In his adaptation of his source, he especially emphasises the sections presenting Helena as an emissary to the Holy Land. Thus, her expedition becomes an extended 'sea-piece.' and her interrogation of Judas is expanded. Also, there is no mention in the Latin of Helena's report back to Constantine on the finding of the cross, but Cynewulf makes particular mention of this, as if to give a more active part to Helena, who in this portion of the narrative is overshadowed by Cyriacus. Further, bringing in Constantine at this point has a unifying effect, and anticipates the final drawing together of the various strands in the plot, when the holy nails, found by Cyriacus, are sent by Helena to Constantine, to be set in his bridle. However, though Helena is the central actor, it is the cross which is used by Cynewulf to give the poem thematic unity: the cross inspires the conversions of Constantine and Judas, and, in the epilogue, Cynewulf's own spiritual regeneration.

In all three poems, then, there is an attempt to tighten the structure and increase the dramatic effect of the story. Whereas the originals are characterised by their brief and unadorned narrative—the two vitae are particularly bald, the Old English poems dwell on the persons and
situations involved. While certain features present in the originals are omitted, the figures of the heroines and the moral conflicts focusing on them are emphasised, and added weight is given to them by extended descriptions and speeches. We shall see that the traditional qualities appropriate to the saintly heroine are stressed: her beauty, purity, authority, and, above all, her devotion to the cause of God. This last feature emerges not just from the heroine's words but from the action as a whole, and is virtually the sum of her other qualities.

The standard qualities to be attributed to the heroine—beauty, nobility, wisdom, ascendancy over her enemies—are simply conveyed by stock epithets such as torht (Judith, 1. 43), æðele (Judith, 1. 256; Elene, 1. 275; Juliana, 1. 175), gleaw (Judith, 1. 13; Juliana, 1. 131), tireadig (Elene, 1. 604). In Juliana, the youth and beauty of the heroine are stressed; in Elene, the victorious qualities more commonly associated with the warrior are combined with Helena's dignity as queen ("geatolic guðcwen golde gehyrsted," 1. 331). Judith is described in terms both of beauty ("ides ælfscinu," 1. 14) and saintliness ("þa eadigan mægð," 1. 35), and of victoriousness. She and her companion, returning to Bethulia, are called collenferhœ and eadhreðige (11. 134-35). The epithets chosen are symbolic rather than realistic. Thus, sigecwen (Elene, 1. 260) and guðcwen (Elene, 1. 331) applied to Helena cannot refer to an actual
military victory, but suggest Helena's impressive authority as commander of her force of men, and also imply her moral victory over the Jews. Similarly, the youthful, radiant beauty of Juliana is the counterpart of her inner purity. Eleusius addresses her:

"Min se swetesta sunnan scima,
Juliana! Hwæt, þu glæm hafast,
ginfæste giefe, geoguðhades blæði!"

(11. 166-68)

The words *torht* and *ælfscinu* applied to Judith suggest radiance and more than human beauty.³⁸

The characterisation of the three heroines is partly achieved by indirect means. The introduction of the set pieces familiarly found in Old English poetry has the side effect of emphasising certain of the qualities appropriate to the female saint. Thus, the use of the battle theme, taken up in Judith's stirring speech to her people (1. 191b) and continued in the action of the Israelites afterwards, has the effect of demonstrating her forceful military leadership and associating her with the typical male warrior leader. In *Elene*, there is a vigorous description of Helena's army embarking, sailing over the sea, and marching to Jerusalem (11. 232b-63). This description suggests that Helena too is a vigorous military leader, but the effect cannot be as telling as in Judith, since this is a peaceful expedition.³⁹ Again, the extended presentation of Holofernes and Eleusius has the result of emphasising by contrast the characters and
situations of Judith and Juliana, respectively. The *Judith* poet dwells on the grossness of Holofernes in his cups (ll. 21b-27), and Cynewulf makes Eleusius address Juliana in words full of hostility (ll. 190-208). Both men exult in their might; the poets speak of how Holofernes *hloR* (*Judith*, l. 23) and Eleusius *ahloR* (*Juliana*, l. 189). This arrogance forms an ironic contrast with the saints' calm confidence in the support of God.

The piety of the saint is not so much an isolatable feature as a function of others. It is present in the most basic elements of the poems: the plot and the poet's attitude. The heroine's dedication is demonstrated by the incidents of the narrative itself: Judith boldly undertakes her mission to Holofernes' camp and decapitates him to further the cause of the Israelites, which is also the cause of God; Juliana remains firm in her faith in the face of the utmost pressure to deny it; Helena leads her army to Jerusalem, compels the Jews to accede to her wishes, initiates the finding of the cross and the sacred nails, and founds a church. At all moments, the poets are conscious of the Christian significance of their works. The saint's Christian devotion is as much a part of the character of the Old-Testament Judith as it is of the characters of Juliana and Helena. Judith prays to the Father, Son and Holy Ghost (ll. 83-84), the "*drynesse *drym" (l. 86).

Much of the emphasis on the heroine's saintliness
and much of the poets' didactic purpose is conveyed through the speeches. In *Judith*, the main character's speeches have real energy because they arise out of her immediate situation and are directly linked with action. In lines 83-94a she prays to the Lord for strength to defeat the Assyrians in the person of Holofernes. In lines 177-98 she addresses the Israelites, urging them to fall upon the Assyrians. However, in *Elene* and *Juliana* the confrontation between the devout saint and her irreligious opponents takes the form of long speeches designed to demonstrate the authority of the heroine and the logical rightness of her position. The utterances of Juliana (ll. 46-57, 108-16, 132-39, 149-57, 176-83, 210-24, etc.) are repeated statements of her moral standpoint, and are counterbalanced by Eleusius' attempt to persuade her to accept his own gods (ll. 190-208) and by the devil's lengthy account of his crimes (ll. 289-315a, 321-44, 352-417, 430b-53, 461-530a). The human interest in all this is minimal. The speeches in *Elene* are less mechanical, but the didactic element is still strong. When Helena addresses the Jews, she begins with an account of the prophets' sayings concerning Christ (ll. 333-76), and proceeds to a condemnation of the Jewish people (ll. 386-95). Her subsequent interrogation of the Jews collectively and Judas in particular consists of repeatedly threatening them with death, and stressing her interest in the cross (ll. 574-84a, 605b-08, 621-26, 643-54, 663-66, 670-82a,
686-90). Judas' replies (ll. 611-18, 632-41, and 656-61) are intended to present a series of spurious justifications, but in fact there is a tendency for him to become a sympathetic figure at this point. His extremely long speech to the Jews (ll. 419b-535) is an indirect indictment of them, since it contains an account of the crucifixion and the part played in it by the Jews. The largely doctrinal character of the speeches in both poems can scarcely make them lifelike, and the effect is rather monotonous.

The piety of the typical female saint is especially associated with her chastity. The veneration accorded to virginity is met with everywhere. We find it in Bede's celebration of Æthelthryth, mentioned in Chapter I. Ælfric's Homily on the Birth of the Virgin is an extended paean to virginity, expressed with poetic eloquence, and rising to a high pitch of intensity in the rapturous passage describing the song of the virgin host surrounding the Lamb. But the presentation of virginity in the poems under consideration is completely matter-of-fact, and quite lacking in this inspirational quality.

Virginity cannot play a part in the character of Helena, since she is the mother of Constantine, but it does play a prominent part in the characterisation of Judith and Juliana. In both cases it is worthy of comment, since it is not entirely in keeping with the given
narrative. Judith in the Bible is a widow. It is true that her virtuous and retiring behaviour since the death of her husband is stressed, but there is no question of her being a maid, as she is in the Old English poem. This decisive change may well be the work of the poet rather than of an intermediary source. Ælfric's Homily on the Book of Judith emphasises her purity, but follows the Vulgate in making her a widow. The effect of this change is to make Judith even more like the typical female saint.\textsuperscript{42} Also, the poet makes Judith stand out in sharper relief against Holofernes by presenting her as the epitome of maidenly purity, in contrast with Holofernes' licentiousness and debauchery, which he also stresses. In Juliana, there is a certain inconsistency in the presentation of the heroine's dedication to virginity, for at one point the poet states that she has dedicated her maidenhood to God (ll. 29b-31), while a little later she declares her willingness to marry Eleusius if he will first become a Christian (ll. 47b-50). Because of Cynewulf's eagerness to stress the virtue of choosing the celibate life, Juliana is credited with two distinct moral positions, both acceptable from a Christian point of view, but not compatible.

In their adaptations of their originals, the Old English poets allow nothing which might detract from the dignity and purity of their heroines. Thus, in addition to the changes of plot or character-function pointed out
earlier, there are significant omissions of detail designed to remove the cruder features of the originals. These omissions are especially noticeable in Juliana and Judith, where the Old English poems show a distinct difference in tone from their Latin sources. When Juliana is thrown into prison, in the Latin version she utters a prayer to God which ends with a vengeful reference to Eleusius: "... fac ipsum praefectum, participem daemoniorum, a me deridere, et ipsum consumptum a vermibus magno dolore torquere ... ." The entire passage is omitted in Cynewulf's version. Indeed, the overall impression created by Cynewulf's poem is a less garish one. This is especially noticeable in Juliana's confrontation with Belial, the devil. Cynewulf retains the basic features of the episode: Belial comes to her disguised as an angel and tempts her; she calls to God for assistance, is instructed to seize the devil and force him to reveal his identity, which she does; he then confesses all his crimes. When she is summoned from prison, she drags him ignominiously after her. He makes a final appearance at Juliana's execution, but she confounds him with a mere backward glance. A definitely humorous note is introduced with Belial, reminiscent of the treatment of devils in (later) medieval drama. The humorous touch is present in Cynewulf's poem, but is restrained in comparison with the roughness of the Latin version. The latter describes how, after Juliana has
physically overpowered the devil, she beats him savagely with a chain, and how, after dragging Belial with her on her way from the prison, she throws him into a place full of filth. In the Old English poem, the beating of the devil is omitted, and the "locum stercore plenum" is rendered in much vaguer language, the gist of which is that Juliana banished Belial back to hell:

Da hine seo fæmne forlet
æfter þæchwilæ  þystra neosan
in sweartne grund,  sawla gewinnnan,
on wita forwyrd.

(ll. 553b-56a)

In its more restrained tone, the Old English poem contrasts not only with its Latin source, but with its early Middle English analogue, the late twelfth-century Liflade ant te Passiun of Seinte Juliene of the Katherine Group. T. Shippey notes that the Middle English prose version, unlike Cynewulf's poem, picks up "a colloquial sensationalism" present in the Latin. The essential material of the Juliana legend is sensational, but this aspect is certainly muted in the Old English. In contrast, the life in the Katherine Group is full of rough but lively details of action and characterisation. Juliana binds Belial's hands so tightly that "him wrong euch neil 7 blakede of þe blode," and then beats him "se luþerliche þet wa wes him o.live." Again, she speaks in language much too acerbic and down-to-earth for Old English poetry. She addresses her persecutors as "beliales budeles," and Eleusius as "heæene hund," and declares, "lutel me is
Less lively, but more spectacular, is the early Middle English *Life of St. Katherine*,\(^\text{51}\) which gives its name to the Katherine Group. Indeed, a summary of the events in the *Life of St. Katherine* provides an excellent example of the horrific and garish elements which characterise the saint's legend, especially that of the virgin martyr, and from which the Old English works are comparatively free. In fact, the early Middle English life is actually toned down from its Latin original, and differs from the other members of the Katherine Group in this respect.\(^\text{52}\) Katherine is a learned girl of noble family in Alexandria who rebukes the Emperor Maxentius when he is sacrificing animals to heathen gods in a temple. Maxentius summons fifty scholars to dispute with her, and she defeats and converts them all, whereupon Maxentius has them burned to death. She also converts Maxentius' queen, Augusta, and Porphirius, the chief of his knights, who converts his men in turn. There is a grisly description of the instrument designed for Katherine's execution, a spiked wheel—the wheel is miraculously shattered by an angel, and an even more grisly description of the martyrdom of Augusta, whose breasts are torn off by nails attached to the nipples, after which she is beheaded. All this takes place at the command of the bloodthirsty Maxentius, who has Porphirius and his knights executed,
and finally has Katherine beheaded. Cynewulf's *Juliana* is mildness itself in comparison.

The Book of Judith is not crudely sensational, but like the Latin source of *Juliana*, it too contains features which make its heroine a less than ideal figure. In the *Judith* poem too there are noteworthy omissions designed to remove the heroine's less ennobling character-traits. The strong element of guile in the biblical Judith finds no place in the Old English poem. As the beginning of the poem is lost, we cannot tell how the poet introduced Judith's stratagem, but the tenor of what remains suggests that he would have underplayed its inherent deception. There is no indication in the poem that she enticed Holofernes to attempt her seduction. The poet says, "paet was þy fœordan dogore / þæs ðe Þudith hyne, . . . / . . . ærest gesohte" (ll. 12b-14), but does not explain her motivation. There is no mention of Judith's making it her custom to go outside the camp to pray—and thereby skilfully preparing for the occasion when she will need to escape.  

She is not present at the feast, whereas in the Bible she takes pains to make a gracious appearance there. The poet makes Holofernes' feast uproarious and disgusting, but her absence from it prevents any slur upon her. When she finds herself alone with the unconscious Holofernes, she prays to God for strength before she kills him. In the Bible,
Judith first of all makes a formal and somewhat extended prayer asking God's support so that she may overthrow the Assyrians through Holofernes. Then there is a pause, and she simply asks to be made strong, before striking the blow. The effect is to suggest a certain natural repugnance and timidity, which she makes an effort to overcome. In the Old English poem, Judith utters a prayer expressing her need for God's aid (ll. 83-94b), but she only prays once, and there is no indication of any hesitation on her part.

The elimination of the less noble aspects of the heroine's character is also to be seen in Ælfric's Homily on the Book of Esther. Like his paraphrase of the Book of Judith, Ælfric's treatment of the story of Esther is a condensation of the biblical text, emphasising its moral significance, and keeping most of the major features of the original. However, the character of Esther is softened. There is no mention of her risking death by going before the king unbidden, the most striking action of Esther's in the biblical account. Nor does Ælfric mention her demand that Haman's two sons be hanged like their father. Ælfric merely has Ahasuerus state his intention to have "Amanes magas" killed. Further, Esther's piety is emphasised by making her the vehicle for Ahasuerus' conversion to belief in the One True God; there is no mention of such a conversion in the Bible. And Ælfric inserts a passage expanding on Esther's beauty
and virtue. Altogether, the effect is to make Esther a more amiable, but much more 'wishy-washy' character than the fearsome Esther of the Old Testament. In fact, Ælfric's treatment of Esther involves a greater transformation of the original character than does his handling of Judith, although even Ælfric's Esther is by no means as strikingly adapted from the original as the heroine of the poetic Judith.

Altogether, the tendency of Cynewulf and the Judith poet is to use the simple and symbolic presentation of character associated with the hagiographic genre. The figures of Juliana and Helena are already very stereotyped, and Cynewulf brings out the traditional qualities even more strongly. Although the tale of Judith has inherent affinities with the saint's life, the character of Judith as found in the Bible has far more realism. The Old English poet moves away from this, and brings Judith more into line with the stylised figures of the saints. Judith in the Bible is a woman of wary intelligence as well as beauty and inspirational courage. She is remarkable, but not super-human. In the Old English poem, all the features of the tale which do not tend to a thoroughly heroic presentation of the main figure are deleted or changed. Nevertheless, Judith remains a much more vigorous character than Helena or Juliana. Only Judith is really involved in action which demands energy and decision. By contrast, the courage and determination of the other two
women is presented in a very mechanical and superficial way. There is no resourcefulness in Helena's interrogation, only persistent repetition of threat and goal, while the torments which Juliana goes through might as well be a series of spectacles at which she is merely an observer, because she never seems to suffer. In neither case is there any sense of making a choice or taking part in a struggle.

Unfortunately, some of the livelier aspects of other versions of the legends are the very ones which the poets choose to tone down. One is grateful for the relative absence of crude sensationalism, but the rather rough treatment of character which accompanies it can sometimes be quite lifelike. It is at the moments when the saints are not simply noble and dignified that they appear most convincing. When the Latin Juliana looks forward to seeing Eleusius consumed by worms, she seems less high-minded but more plausible. The ruthless and acid-tongued Juliana of the Middle English is quite a vigorous character. Again, the Judith of the Bible is a more interesting figure than her counterpart in Old English poetry simply because she has mundane as well as heroic qualities.

None of the characters in Elene, Juliana, and Judith is presented naturalistically, but the non-heroic figures, in which the poets are not obliged to maintain an unwavering dignity, are the most lively. The excessive noisiness of
Holofernes at his feast is described in colourful terms by the Judith poet:

Da weorð Holofernus,  
goldwine gumena,  on gytesalum,  
hloh ond hlydde,  hlynede ond dynede,  
þæt mihten fira bearn  feorran gehyran  
hu se stiðmoda  styrmde ond gylede.

(11. 21b-25)

The spectacle of Belial reduced to abject appeals for mercy retains its vitality:

"Ic þec halsige,  hlæfdige min,  
Juliana,  fore godes sibbum,  
þæt þu furþur me  fraceþu ne wyrce."

(11. 539-41)

That the devil should be the victim rather than the inflictor of torments is a nice reversal, and the appeal "fore godes sibbum" is a fetching piece of irony. There is a similarly pleasing absurdity in the abrupt transformation of Belial from a blustering threatener to a grovelling wretch simply by a glance from Juliana (11. 619-34). The figures of Holofernes and Belial are caricatures, but they are executed with lively strokes.

The character of Judas before his conversion is treated on a more serious level and with a fair degree of human feeling. However, the humanisation of Judas only makes the figure of Helena more cold and unappealing. Judas is faced with a genuine dilemma: the problem of whether to reveal his knowledge of the true facts of the crucifixion and thus condemn his people to perpetual disgrace, or to conceal the truth and lose his own life. Cynewulf presents with considerable sympathy his inability
to make the harder choice when faced with life and death:

"Hƿa mæg þæm geweorðan þe on westenne
meðe ond mestelæs morland trydæd,
hungre gehafted, ond him hlaf ond stan
on gesihæ ond samod geweorðad,
streac ond hnesæ, þæt he þone stan nime
wīð hungres hleo, hlafes ne gime,
gewende to wædle, ond þa wiste wiðsæce,
beteran wiðhyccge, þonne he bega beneah?"

(11. 611-18) 59

The reader can scarcely help identifying with Judas rather than with Helena at this moment. Like the idealised saints, he is sorely tried, but unlike them he has the ordinary man's weaknesses and goes through processes of doubt and struggle. Again, the reader is likely to feel a good deal of sympathy for Judas when he is thrown into a pit and starved for seven days, before he finally submits. The Anglo-Saxon audience may have been less sentimental, but their sympathies—like Cynewulf's own—must have been engaged to some extent.

In their presentation of character, Judith, Juliana, and Elene are strongly influenced by the demands of the saint's life genre. It is not a genre which is conducive to the creation of lively characters, partly because it is highly stereotyped, but more importantly because its aim is Christian instruction rather than psychological truth. The real-life Anglo-Saxon saints mentioned in Chapter I were endowed with qualities which fail to appear in their epical counterparts. From the accounts of Ælfflæd's intervention at the synod and Hild's administration of her monastery, we can see that
these women were blessed with discretion, good sense, and tact. Again, Rudolf's account of Leofgyth brings out her kindliness and the affection she inspired in the nuns under her charge. Miracles occur in these more sober and reliable histories too, but much of the detail rings true, and produces a picture very different from that of the abrasively uncompromising heroines in epical hagiography.

Although secular rather than religious, some types of medieval romance bear a resemblance to the epical saint's life. In the Hellenistic romance, especially, we are presented with a series of extravagant situations, illustrative of the conflict between good and evil, in which good finally triumphs; while the relationship of the protagonists to the action tends to be external and mechanical. The Old English Apollonius of Tyre is a romance of this kind. The adventures of the virtuous Apollonius are a sort of secular counterpart to the trials of the saint, and fulfil the same demand for the epic and sensational. Apollonius proceeds from riches to rags and back again, wins a wife and loses her, and finally has his supposedly dead wife and long absent daughter restored to him. However, the treatment of character in the Old English Apollonius, though stilted, is still superior to that in the epical saints' lives. In particular, the relationship between Apollonius and Arcestrate, the king's daughter whom he afterwards marries, is presented in quite a lively manner, and shows us a heroine more aggressive
than the secular ladies of Old English poetry and less austere and rigid than the female saints.61

A romance of similar type which affords a closer comparison with the Old English saints' poems is to be found much later in the medieval period: Chaucer's Man of Law's Tale of the maligned and long-suffering wife, Constance. Like Apollonius, Constance goes through an extraordinary series of adventures; indeed, some of the same motifs are present as in the Apollonius story. She resembles the female saints of the epical lives in representing an ideal of virtue which remains uncompromised throughout all the trials and tribulations which befall it. However, Constance, though ultimately an unrealistic character, is a much gentler, and hence much more attractive, figure than the heroines of the three Old English saints' poems. Also, Chaucer's Tale is more subtle and sophisticated in poetic technique than the Old English poems.

The three saints' poems can be related to a development in literature which extends from the homily on one hand to the picturesque romance on the other. But the characterising aim of the saint's life, to provide a mirror of perfection, is less in evidence in the romance genre, and absent from many romances. The saint's life aims to present an, ultimately unrealisable, ideal of human virtue, and this is the reason why, the greater its effort to approximate to its ideal, the less satisfactory
is its characterisation.

The literary saint, especially the 'epical' saint, is conceived in terms of a set of absolutes which as a whole do not correspond to the human condition. The combination of perfect faith, perfect virtue, perfect serenity cannot move because it appeals to no shared experience. There is no suffering, difficulty, or failure. The Old English poems tone down some of the harsher aspects of their originals, but the result is a movement away from, rather than towards, a convincing presentation. The same movement can be discerned in the homilies on Esther and Judith, but is less noticeable there. In our three poems, the unheroic elements which lent some vitality to their sources and analogues, are pared away, or, when they are left, attached to characters other than the heroines. The official character of the saint is often at variance with her actions. This is seen in the lack of any demonstration of Helena's capacities as a military leader, and in the inconsistency between Juliana's dedicated virginity and her willingness to marry on certain conditions. Even when the heroines become assertive, instead of merely rigid and mechanical, the effect tends to be jarring, since their sternness and severity are out of keeping with the gracious dignity appropriate to their role. Cases in point are Juliana's degradation of Belial (more marked in the Latin) and Helena's wearing-down of Judas. Judith avoids these
awkward discrepancies, and, thanks to the power of the inherited story, the heroine has an organic involvement in the action, instead of appearing to be grafted onto it. Judith is a much more vigorous character than Helena or Juliana, but even she, due to the influence of the hagiographic tradition, is stripped of the efforts and fears that would make her really convincing. The heroes of secular tradition in Old English Poetry are stereotyped too, but their lives are fraught with struggle and anxiety, and they appeal to the human predicament in a way that these saintly heroines never do. As Rosemary Woolf observes:

... it is one of the disadvantages of the hagiographic convention that complexities of feeling are impermissible, and therefore the subtlety achieved in Beowulf is quite beyond its range. ... the epic exaltation of bravery unmodulated by the epic awareness of mortality can appear crudely bright.62
Footnotes


2 Timmer, p. 7.


4 Cf. Claes Schaar, Critical Studies in the Cynewulf Group (Lund and Copenhagen, 1949). Schaar picks out certain features, mainly syntactic, which he believes distinguish the Cynewulf canon (Elene, Juliana, Christ II, The Fates of the Apostles) from the other poems in the Cynewulf group (Andreas, Christ I and III, Guthlac A and B, The Phoenix, The Dream of the Rood). Marguerite-Marie Dubois' study of Cynewulf aims at showing how he has acclimatised Mediterranean legends to Anglo-Saxon ideas and tastes, but the features on which she comments are characteristic of Old English poetry in general rather than of Cynewulf especially: amplification by the technique of variation, the introduction of set passages on battle and the sea, etc., Les Éléments latins dans la Poésie religieuse de Cynewulf (Paris, 1943). R. E. Diamond's article, "The Diction of the Signed Poems of Cynewulf," PQ, 57 (1959), 228-41, attempts to demonstrate the traditional and formulaic nature of Old English poetry with reference to a particular group of poems, and is concerned with the typical, rather than any possibly peculiar, features of Cynewulf's poetry.


7. R. Aigran sees hagiography as a science continuing down to the present day, a science which has a duty to be exact, although it has sometimes failed in this duty. Aigran's attitude is apparent throughout his book on hagiography, L'Hagiographie, ses sources, ses méthodes, son histoire (Paris, 1953).

8. Ælfric introduces his collection of saints' lives with the idea that forms their justification: God reveals himself to men through the miracles of his saints, Ælfric's Lives of Saints, ed. W. W. Skeat; EETS, O.S., 76 and 82 (London, 1881), pp. 4-6. See also the close of Ælfric's Life of St. Edmund: "Crist geswutelap mannum þyrh his mæran halgan þæt he is ælmhtig god þe macan swilc wundra . . . ." Medieval English Saints' Legends, ed. Klaus Sperk (Tübingen, 1970), p. 98.

9. See n. 4.

10. See Woolf, Juliana, Introduction, pp. 11-12.


12. Some of the Anglo-Latin lives of native saints contain much circumstantial detail that can be very informative. Cf. Eddius Stephanus' account in his Life of Wilfrid, of the part played by the abbess Ælflæd in a synod, described in Chapter 1.

13. Rosemary Woolf distinguishes between hagiography and history, rather than between more and less fanciful kinds of hagiography, and believes that Bede quite self-consciously passed to and fro between the style of historian and that of hagiographer ("Saints' Lives," p 41).

14. Commenting on Andreas, Rosemary Woolf observes, "It is the world of the fantastic and marvellous, now best known from the much later examples of this genre [i.e., tales of the marvels of the East], the Travels of Sir John Mandeville" ("Saints' Lives," p. 51).

15. Jackson J. Campbell regards both Judith and Helena in the Old English poems as figural representatives of Ecclesia. See, respectively, "Schematique Technique in Judith," ELH, 38 (1971), 155-72, and "Cynewulf's Multiple Revelations," Medievalia et Humanistica, N.S., 3 (1972), 257-77. Several other recent critics have stressed that

16 Cf. Campbell: "In his [the Old English poet's] poem, only two massive, opposing characters remain, archetypal in their simplicity and in their incompatibility," "Schematic Technique," p. 156.

17 Cf. Rosemary Woolf, "The Lost Opening to the Judith," MLR, 50 (1955), 168-72. The same view is taken by Rose in her dissertation on the poem (pp. 10-11). However, Timmer, in the Introduction to his edition, states that since the section numbering indicates the poem contains the last part of Section IX, followed by Sections X, XI, and XII, three-quarters of the poem must have been lost. See edition, p. 2.

18 Rose offers an interesting explanation for the poet's motivation in focusing exclusively upon Judith and Holofernes; she argues that the poet's aim is a study in leadership, pointing the contrast between the good leader, Judith, and the bad leader, Holofernes (see Introduction, p. 7 above). Rose believes that the poet presents Judith as a military leader rather than as the typical female saint. See especially dissertation, pp. 5-9. This view of Judith as a study of good and bad leaders is certainly a valid way of looking at the poem; however, it need not debar us from linking it with the genre of the saints' lives.

19 See "Ælfric's Homilie über das Buch Judith," Angelsächsische Homilien und Heiligenleben, ed Bruno Assmann; Bib. der angls. Prosa, 3 (Kassel, 1889; rep. Darmstadt, 1964), 102-16. Assmann suggests that the homily was written between 997 and 1012 (p. 259).

20 Campbell uses this feature of Ælfric's homily as evidence in support of his contention that Judith in the poem represents the Church, "Schematic Technique," p. 164.

21 For February 16th; Tom. II, 873-77. The Latin text is edited from eleven manuscripts. See Woolf, Juliana, Introduction, p. 11. She suggests that the date of this version must be prior to the second half of the sixth century.

22 The Juliana of Cynewulf (Boston, 1904), Introduction, pp. xxx-xxxii.


This is pointed out by Calder, who, however, finds the simplified and even stultified treatment artistically justifiable. See pp. 357-371.


Gradon believes that the text which most closely resembles Cynewulf's poem is an eighth-century St. Gall manuscript (edition, p. 19). However, Campbell favours the seventh-century MS on which Alfred Holder based his edition, Inventio Sanctae Crucis (Leipzig, 1889), "Cynewulf's Multiple Revelations," p. 258. In her essay, "Saints' Lives," Woolf states that "Elene . . . is . . . probably to be connected with the feast of the Invention of the Cross, a feast of eighth-century Gallican provenance . . ." (p. 46).

The words "in hoc signo vinces," which appeared to Constantine in his vision actually referred to the Chi-Rho monogram, which Constantine beheld in the sky and accordingly instructed to be painted on his men's shields. As the legend developed, this 'sign' came to be regarded as the cross itself, carried into battle before the army. Similarly, the battle, actually part of the campaign against Maxentius in Italy, became a conflict with the barbarians, in this version on the Danube. See Wolff, dissertation, pp. 92-99. Cynewulf inherited these features from his source; they appear in the Acta S. Judae-Quiriaci (AS, I, 445).

In the account of the Invention of the Cross contained in the thirteenth-century Legenda Aurea by Jacobus de Voragine, a whole series of stories is strung along this unifying thread. In the first part of the account, certain Old-Testament figures come into contact with the tree destined to form the wood of the cross. The sections focussing respectively on Constantine, Helena, and Judas Cyriacus follow. Then the narrative continues with the martyrdom of Cyriacus, and finally closes with further miracles performed by the cross, wonders which have nothing to do with any of the persons previously mentioned.

31 A part also played by Judith.

32 Hermann justifies this inconsistency by the argument that "Elene's plans are not warlike literally, but spiritually" (p. 123), and that "the military imagery of this section of the poem is meant to recall the military imagery of Ephesians 6.11-17" (p. 124).

33 Cf. Juliana. Woolf notes the unfortunate effect of this "inverted passion" of Cyriacus, in which it is easy to sympathise with the wrong side, "Saint's Lives," p. 47. Campbell rather unsuccessfully tries to justify this passage by arguing that Helena is to be taken as the Church—rather than an unpleasant individual, and that Judas tells lies, denying knowledge of the crucifixion, "Cynewulf's Multiple Revelations," pp. 265-67.

34 The earlier, highly formulaic account of Constantine's battle is another set piece introduced by Cynewulf.

35 Gradon believes it unlikely that Cynewulf invented this passage, and assumes that it must have been present in his immediate source (edition, p. 19, n. 3). Hermann, however, credits Cynewulf with its insertion, and finds it part of a deliberate plan, along with his other changes of the Latin source (p. 115).

36 This thematic unity has been pointed out by Wolff in his dissertation, Campbell in his article on Elene, and Fish, who all show how the poem is unified in its different sections (they disagree as to the number of sections into which the poem should be divided) by the theme of conversion through the cross. Whereas Cynewulf's characteristic signed epilogue is integrated into the poem in Elene, it is not integrated in Juliana. Calder, however, argues that the Juliana epilogue is thematically relevant, since it is the poet's fear of Judgement, expressed in the epilogue, which has inspired him to write the poem.

37 Cf. Campbell: "The range of adjectives is extremely narrow: she is beautiful, gold-adorned, blessed, holy and above all, wise," "Schematic Technique," p. 156.

38 Rose regards the association of brightness with the divine and with virtue as more important than its visual sense in these descriptions of Judith. She cites as a parallel the description of Juliana as sunsciene (l. 229), arguing that a person who has been suspended by the hair for six days [actually, six hours] can hardly be beautiful in a literal sense. See dissertation, pp. 22-24.
However, the moral element need not exclude the visual. There are plenty of departures from naturalism in the saints' lives.

39 Cf. n. 32, above.

40 Cf. n. 33, above.

41 Printed in Assmann, Homilien und Heiligenleben, pp. 24-48. Peter Clemoes, in his Introduction to the reprint of Assmann's edition, suggests that the homily was written in 1005-06. See p. xx.

42 Cf. Woolf, "The Lost Opening to the Judith," p. 171. Rose, who believes that Judith is not to be associated with the virgin saints, argues that the presentation of her as a maegð is not significant. Rose suggests that "traditional vocabulary has influenced the change in Judith's status," notes a Jewish manuscript of the tenth or eleventh century which presents Judith as a young girl, and states, "Comparison with Ælfric's homily and with the Vulgate source, as well as with some of the Jewish medieval accounts, shows that the OE poem places considerably less stress on Judith's chastity" (p. 7). It is true that both the Bible and Ælfric emphasise Judith's sexual decorum, and that Judith's chastity in the poem is conveyed not discursively, but by appositive epithets and by the contrast provided in Holofernes. But the poet certainly stresses her virginity and makes it a significant element in a complex of 'saintly' virtues.


44 See Strunk, p. 43.

45 See Introduction, p. 12. This work is edited by S. R. T. O. D'Ardenne, EETS, 248 (London, 1961). The works in the Katherine Group mainly have a common subject, the praise of virginity. This subject, their date, and their common dialect of origin link them with the well known Ancren Riwle, the spiritual guide written for three noble sisters who became anchoresses. However, the homely wisdom and vigorous imagery of the latter work are very different from the essentially crude material of Seinte Juliene and the other saints' lives in the group. Nevertheless, the Katherine Group and the Ancren Riwle may well be related, though not necessarily all by the same author. See D'Ardenne, Introduction, pp. xl-xlvii. Among other works, the Katherine group contains lives of saints Katherine, Juliana, and Margaret, Sawles Warde and Hali Meióhád.
Cf. Einenkel, Introduction, p. xx. Einenkel observes that "the character of Saint Katherine is depicted in the original as impetuous and vindictive; in one word, anything but saintly." The works in the Katherine Group that he is comparing Katherine to at this point are the Juliana and Margaret lives.


Cf. Timmer, p. 14:
"Perhaps the poet wanted to stress the sinfulness of excessive drinking . . . So . . . [he] gave a glowing description of the feast and then went on to say how, after his excessive drinking, Holofernes' thoughts turned to the sinful desire for Judith."

Printed in Assmann, Homilien und Heiligenleben, pp. 92-101. Clemoes dates the work around 1002.

Ibid., p. 101 (ll. 310-11).

Ibid., p. 95 (ll. 97-99).

It is this heroic presentation which essentially distinguishes the heroines of the three poems from Judith and Esther as described by Ælfric.

Woolf comments upon Cynewulf's evocative presentation of this image, inherited from his source, and deriving ultimately from the temptation of Christ, who was able to make the harder choice, "Saints' Lives," pp. 47-48.

The Old English Apollonius dates from the eleventh century and is a fairly close rendering of a Latin original. See The Old English Apollonius of Tyre, ed. Peter Goolden (Oxford, 1958), Introduction, pp. xx-xxxiv.

This subject will be dealt with in the fuller discussion of Apollonius included in Chapter V, on the Old English love lyrics.
CHAPTER V

LYRICAL POEMS FEATURING WOMEN: WULF AND EADWACER AND THE WIFE'S LAMENT

In the poems of the saint's life genre, discussed in the preceding chapter, there is a heavy emphasis upon female characters; but, due to the limitations of the genre, no genuine characterisation is achieved. However, there are two Old English poems which are exclusively devoted to the presentation of a woman's state of mind and in which a genuine psychological insight is found. These poems are the two elegiac love lyrics: Wulf and Eadwacer and The Wife's Lament.

Both of these works are highly obscure and difficult. Most scholars read them as elegiac laments uttered by female speakers. As such, the poems are to be associated with the other Old English 'elegies,' the group of poems and passages handling traditional themes of loss and transience, and presenting the traditional exile figure, one of the standard character-types discussed in Chapter II.\(^1\) Most of the elegies are monologues, and they share the same themes and motifs, which also appear in Wulf and Eadwacer and The Wife's Lament. However, in the other poems and passages the
principal elegiac situation is seen in male terms. This situation is most characteristically one of separation from lord and comrades, a separation which results from death or exile. *Wulf and Eadwacer* and *The Wife's Lament*, like all the other elegies which do not form part of longer works, are found in the poetic miscellany which constitutes the Exeter Book. Whereas the first half of the manuscript consists of long religious poems, mostly having to do with the lives of holy personages, the second half consists of short pieces which can be termed philosophical in the broadest sense: reflective and didactic poems, elegiac lyrics, gnomes, and riddles. Thus, *Wulf and Eadwacer* and *The Wife's Lament* can be related to a general background of 'wise saws' collected by the Exeter Book compiler, and to a narrower background of elegiac themes and motifs as seen in the other Exeter Book elegies.

The precise nature of these two poems was not realised by the earliest scholars. Since there is so little treatment of sexual love in the literature of the Anglo-Saxons, it is not surprising that these poems, whose setting is the same warrior society which underlies most Old English poetry, were not at first recognised as love lyrics. *The Wife's Lament* speaks of separation from a 'lord,' and it is only the feminine inflexions of the first two lines that establish the female identity of the speaker and the fact that her 'lord' is a husband rather than the head of a *comitatus*. *Wulf and Eadwacer* is a
short poem which stands at the head of the first group of Exeter Book riddles and was long considered one of them. Its cryptic utterances are indeed riddle-like: "It is to my people as if one gave them a gift" (1. 1) and "That is easily sundered which was never joined" (1. 18). Thus, The Wife's Lament has sometimes been considered the utterance of a man, and Wulf and Eadwacer a riddle, or, more recently, a charm, or a private, cryptic communication.3

The earliest editors of The Wife's Lament assumed that the poem had a male narrator.4 This view has been revived from time to time, and continues to be the subject of debate.5 However, there are literary as well as grammatical arguments for regarding the poem as the speech of a woman. In their respective articles on the poem, Jane Curry6 and Angela Lucas7 have pointed out that the reference to "friends" keeping their beds together in contrast with the speaker's loneliness (ll. 33b ff.) suggests envy of a specifically sexual kind.8 Lucas further notes that, although the wife uses terms which a retainer might use to refer to his lord (hlaford, ll. 6 and 15; leodfruma, l. 8; frean, l. 33), these terms "only convey the notion of an intensely personal relationship based on love and respect" (p. 292). She points out that there is no mention of the social relationship between retainer and lord, no words like beahgifa in The Battle of Maldon (l. 290) and goldwine in The Wanderer (ll. 22 and 35), which embody the concept of the lord as the giver
of treasure. The alternative interpretation of The Wife's Lament as the speech of a lordless thane is based on the \textit{a priori} assumption of the inherent improbability of a love lyric in Old English rather than on the actual evidence of the text. A detailed examination of the poem itself supports the usual interpretation that it is the lament of a woman forcibly separated from her husband.

The fact that The Wife's Lament has so persistently been regarded by some of its modern readers as the speech of a man is the result of the correspondence between the two relationships of thane-lord and wife-husband. This correspondence is foreign to the modern way of thinking, but, as we saw in Chapter I, central to the Anglo-Saxon attitude towards women. It is not surprising that in an Old English poem a woman should use terms like \textit{folga} ("retinue" 1. 9) and \textit{frean} (1. 33) in connection with her relationship to a man, when in the Anglo-Saxon legal documents exactly the same phrase, "willan geceosan," is used for accepting a husband (and master) and taking service with a liege-lord. The correspondence was also noticed in Chapter III, where, in the Riddles, the wife is presented as performing the same kind of services--such as putting on armour--for her husband as a retainer might perform. Also in Chapter III, we found that Hildegund in Waldere performs the same kind of supportive role for her betrothed as he might receive from a retainer. Thus, having a wife speak of her husband in terms belonging to
the vocabulary of comitatus loyalty has nothing inconsistent about it. But, as pointed out by Lucas, these terms are used in The Wife's Lament in connection with a relationship between two persons only, and without reference to the comitatus as a group.

Although sexual relationships are not normally the subject of Old English poems, there are places which suggest that they could be used as poetic themes. In the second stanza of Deor, Beaduhild is presented as most wretched, partly because of the death of her brothers, partly because of her pregnancy by Weland. To be sure, Beaduhild was probably not in love with Weland, since he assaulted her violently and murdered her brothers, but, nevertheless, the focusing on the woman's suffering in a sexual context is significant. The third stanza of the poem provides a stronger, although even more tantalisingly cryptic, example. Here, there is a reference to the Geat's love for Mæthhild, which was so great "paet hi [him?] seo sorglufu slaep ealle binom" (l. 16). The theme of 'love—longing' is barely touched on, but it is certainly alluded to.

With regard to Wulf and Eadwacer, it is not the sex of the speaker, but the whole character and purpose of the poem that is disputed. The nineteenth-century theory that the poem was a riddle was exploded by Henry Bradley, in 1888, who argued very cogently that the "First Riddle" was in fact the dramatic soliloquy of a
woman. Bradley's has long been the received interpretation of *Wulf and Eadwacer*. He summarises the content of the poem as follows: "The speaker . . . is shown by the grammar to be a woman. . . . Wulf is her lover and an outlaw, and Eadwacer . . . is her tyrant husband." The riddle theory persisted well into the present century, but little has been heard of it for several decades. *Wulf and Eadwacer* is now generally regarded as a love poem, although there have been some rather wide deviations from Bradley's reading. However, recently the received interpretation of the poem as a love lament has been challenged. But the alternatives to Bradley's 'standard' interpretation are strained, and differ enormously among themselves.

In both poems, the problems of interpretation arise from the allusive method used by their authors. The narrative background lying behind the poems cannot be established with any certainty, since the poets are concerned with the emotions of the speakers rather than the events which gave rise to them. However, certain facts about the poems can be established beyond any reasonable doubt. Each is spoken by a woman in an 'exilic' situation, although the narrator of *Wulf and Eadwacer* may not actually be in exile. We have already seen in Chapter I how important the kin group was in Anglo-Saxon society, and in Chapter II how the loneliness of exile, i.e., isolation from the group of kin or comrades
(themselves mainly kin), was a particularly poignant theme to the Anglo-Saxons. Women not under the protection of members of their kin—like the banished wife, or subject to tyrannical guardianship—like the narrator of Wulf and Eadwacer, would suffer especially. It is this mood of suffering, heightened to intense anguish by the longing for an absent loved one, that the authors of these two poems attempt to recreate.

The banished wife describes how her husband departed over the waves (ll. 6-7), and how in her loneliness and anxiety she went to seek protection ("folgað secan," 1. 9). The word folgað, referring to service in a retinue, suggests that the wife wished to be taken under the protection of a powerful person, as a retainer would be by his lord. The subsequent lines suggest that her husband's kinsmen placed an unfavourable interpretation on this action, and represented it to him as disloyalty: "Ongunnon pæt pæs monnes magas hygcan / þurh dyrne gepoht, pæt hy todælden unc" (ll. 11-12). Line 15, "Het mec hlaford min herheard niman," is highly problematic. From the thought-sequence, the line is likely to represent a response to the action of the kinsmen described in the preceding lines, and a cause of, or connection with, the wife's friendlessness described in the following lines ("ahte ic leofra lyt on þissum londstedæ, / holdra freoðda" (ll. 16-17a). It is probable, then, that the line refers to the husband's
command that his wife be banished.  

The poem continues:

Forbon is min hyge geomor,  
ða ic me ful gemæcne monnan funde,  
heardsæligne, hygegeormorne,  
mod miþendne, morpor hycgendne.  
Bliþe gebæro . . . (ll. 17b-21a)

This is the punctuation of Krapp and Dobbie, but the period should fall after, not before "Bliþe gebæro," because these lines are obviously a parallel to a later passage:

A scyle geong mon wesan geomormod,  
heard heortan gepoht, swylce habban sceal bliþe gebæro, eac pon breostceare,  
sinsorgna gedreag, . . . (ll. 42-45a)

In the first passage, the wife is lamenting her husband's tendency to conceal dark and gloomy thoughts under a cheerful demeanour. Although in other ways a fully congenial man ("ful gemæcne monnan"), he has a suspicious nature. Presumably as a result of the kinsmen's accusations of disloyalty or actual infidelity on the part of his wife during his absence, the husband harbours murderous thoughts ("morpor hycgendne") against her before finally banishing her. In the later passage, the wife once more reflects on her husband's brooding temperament. In the nature of things, he will be gloomy-minded, although he will attempt to conceal it, whether all his pleasure in the world is at his disposal, or whether (like her) he suffers the hardship of exile. The latter possibility is the one which the wife dwells
on, because it reflects her own experience, and she ends with an exclamation of despair that could apply to both of them: "Wa bið þam þe sceal / of langþe leofes abidan."

The other parts of the poem, which describe the speaker's present miseries, are less difficult. She speaks of the inescapable and ever-present sense of her husband's alienation: "Sceal ic feor ge neah / mines felaleofan fæhþu dreogan" (ll. 25b-26). Again and again, she feels the pain of her husband's departure, the beginning of her troubles: "Ful oft mec her wrape begeat / fromsib frean" (ll. 32b-33a). She describes the lonely and forbidding nature of the place in which she is forced to live, and contrasts her own wretchedness with the happy companionship of those who are able to "keep their beds" together (1. 34).

Wulf and Eadwacer, though shorter, is full of problems of interpretation. The mysterious opening, "Leodum is minum swylce him mon lac ðífe; / willað hy hine ðépëcgan, gif he on þreat cymeð," has led some scholars to believe that a passage is missing here. The first line is certainly opaque, but, in view of the enigmatical style of the poem as a whole, it is unwise to assume that part of the beginning has been lost.

Line 2 is open to a variety of interpretations, since ðépëcgan is otherwise unrecorded, and þreat can mean either "troop" or "peril." Lines 2 and 3, a very
long line followed by a short one, form an embryonic refrain, which is repeated in lines 7 and 8:

\[ \text{willa} \quad \text{hy hine abecgan, gif he on preat cyme. Ungelic is us.} \]

In lines 4 to 6 the speaker mentions Wulf, who is on an island (while she is on another) on which there are "wælreowe weras" (l. 6). Evidently, then, the hine of lines 2 and 7 is Wulf, and the hy are the "wælreowe weras." The order of the words in line 2 (repeated in line 7) suggests a question, and the tone of the line, taken in conjunction with the urgency of the poem as a whole, conveys anxiety and trouble. The speaker fears for Wulf at the hands of the "wælreowe weras." *Abeccan* seems to be connected with *picgan*, "to take" (food), so a viable translation is "Will they receive him if he comes into their company." The speaker fears that the bloodthirsty men will not take in Wulf, but will kill him. The fierce men on Wulf's island are best taken as the woman's own people, the "leodum . . . minum" of line 1, to whom Wulf's capture will be a spoil. Wulf, who is bound to fall into their hands, is the "gift" (*lac*) of line 1. The speaker wonders anxiously about the fate of Wulf, and reflects "Ungelic is us." Line 4, "Wulf is on iège, ic on operre," would come naturally as an explanation of these words. "It is unalike with us" is a way of expressing the separation of the speaker and Wulf.
She goes on to describe how she has followed her Wulf with far-wandering hopes: "Wulfes ic mines widlastum wenum dogode" (l. 9). She speaks of the rainy weather, her sadness, and the embraces of "se beaducafa," which give her mingled pleasure and pain: "Wæs me wyn to þon, wæs me hwæpre eac lað" (l. 12). The word beaducafa ("the battle-bold one") is sometimes taken to refer to Wulf, but since the absence of Wulf is stressed throughout, and since the speaker's reactions to the "bold warrior's" embraces are mixed, it is more probable that the beaducafa is another, steadily present person, i.e., the woman's husband, the Eadwacer who is addressed with scorn in line 16.

The poem reaches a climax of anguish in lines 13 to 15:

Wulf, min Wulf, wena me þine
seoce gedydon, þine seldcymas,
murnende mod, naes meteliste.

These lines, which simply express the speaker's acute unhappiness, caused by her separation from her lover rather than her physical distress, are clear enough. There are then two abrupt changes of tone, from anguish to anger, as the woman turns to her despised husband, and, now that the emotion has been released, the poem ends in melancholy reflectiveness: "Paet mon eape tosliteð þætte næfre gesomnad wæs, / uncer giedd geador" (ll. 18-19). Addressing Eadwacer, the speaker says that Wulf (or a wolf) is bearing "our wretched cub" to the forest. The child,
contemptuously referred to as a hwelp, which is being carried off to its death could be either Eadwacer's or Wulf's, but the bitter tone is more appropriate to the child of the unhappy love-affair. The pun in hwelp also suggests this. Lines 16 and 17 can thus be taken as a defiant acceptance of the end, expressed with resignation in the closing lines. Uncer then has the same reference in lines 16 and 19, and the giedd is the unhappy story of the speaker and her lover.

Attempts have been made to relate both The Wife's Lament and Wulf and Eadwacer to heroic sagas or folk tales. The issue need not delay us here, since the question remains unresolved, and is really immaterial to the emotional impact of the poems. The Wife's Lament has been linked with various stories of maligned wives, the general outlines of which resemble Chaucer's Tale of Constance. More attention has been devoted to Wulf and Eadwacer, since actual names occur in it. Some have related the poem to Norse legends, and others to a possible saga of Odoacer. Probably just because they are found in the same manuscript and both deal with marital affection, The Wife's Lament and The Husband's Message have sometimes been connected, although they are totally different in style and treatment. Another external connection more recently suggested for The Wife's Lament is a possible religious, didactic, even specifically allegorical background. All these suggestions must remain hypothetical.
For the purpose of my own investigation, an analysis of the thoughts and feelings presented in the poems, the issue of a possible connection with traditional material, whether secular or Christian, can be left an open question.

The elegiac quality of the two poems, and their use of the common Old English 'exile' trope, makes itself felt in a number of characteristic details. Each poem is uttered by a person in physical and mental distress. Lonely, and in bleak natural surroundings, she laments her fate. The narrator of *The Wife's Lament* is banished to a cave in the forest. In *Wulf and Eadwacer*, the speaker and her lover are on separate islands surrounded by fen. The opening of *The Wife's Lament*, "Ic þis giedd wrecce bi me ful geomorre, / minre sylfre sið" resembles the beginning of *The Seafarer*, "Mæg ic be me sylfum soðgied wrecan, / sipas secgan." The scenery of *The Wife's Lament* and *Wulf and Eadwacer*, with its vague but evocative descriptions of places in the wilds, by water, in forbidding weather, calls up the same syndrome as the gloomy landscapes and seascapes of *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*. The banished wife seems to be dwelling in some abandoned fortifications, overgrown with briars ("bitre burgtunas, brerum beweaxne," l. 31). The dismal associations of habitations now given over to decay are also present in the descriptions of ruined fortresses in *The Wanderer* and *The Ruin*. The wife imagines her husband sitting under a rocky slope and frosted with the storm, the place being a "dreary hall" surrounded
by water. The picture is very like that of the Wanderer awakening by the seashore to see the dull waves, the seabirds, and rime and snow falling mingled with hail. Again, the speaker in Wulf and Eadwacer sits weeping on her island while the rain falls. In all these respects, the two love lyrics are obviously drawing on the standard exile-theme utilised in the other elegies. Nevertheless, the mood created in the love poems is significantly different.

If we compare the overall impression made by Wulf and Eadwacer and The Wife's Lament with that made by the other elegies, these two poems are more truly lyrical in the modern sense. Here the Old English poets come closest to that recreation of a personal and spontaneous emotion, the sense of an individual moment in time, which we regard as lyricism. Most of the elegies have broader, more philosophical implications. Thus, the latter parts of The Wanderer and The Seafarer move into general reflections on the transience of the world, and a generalised idea of transience is implied in The Ruin's objective description of a fortress fallen into decay. The subject of The Husband's Message—the delivery of a love-letter from a distant husband to his wife, summoning her to join him, could have called forth the more lyrical note, but the presentation is formal and stilted: the message is narrated, with due decorum, by a servant or retainer of the husband, and no real empathy with the
emotions of the lovers is evoked.

In *Wulf and Eadwacer* and *The Wife's Lament*, the choice of a female figure as the focus of an exilic situation has enabled the poets to draw on all the familiar poignancy of the exile trope, and has prompted them to go a step further, into the recreation of feelings more personal and more intense. The elegiac genre is already that which lends itself most to introspection and evocation of mood. There is a suggestive power in the figures of the Wanderer and the Seafarer which is absent from Beowulf and Byrhtnoth. But the love lyrics narrated by women have an added edge; their presentation of mood is both freer in its use of association and more concentrated in its effect.

The elegies with male speakers also represent private experience insofar as the speaker is isolated and introspective. The effect of this is, indeed, to heighten emotion. Some of the most affecting passages of Old English poetry are those elegiac pieces expressing loneliness and longing. But the person-to-person relationships which form the basis of the 'women's' elegies have a precision and narrow focus which gives them an added delicacy and sharpness. Thus, *The Wife's Lament* and *Wulf and Eadwacer* show a use of images focussing on a narrow scene in which small but significant gestures are enacted: the figure walking in the earth-cave in contrast to the lovers lying in their beds; the woman
seated weeping, and then oppressively encircled by the warrior's embrace. The moment in which the Wanderer dreams that he embraces and kisses his lord and places head and hands on his knee is one of the few places of parallel intensity in Old English poetry. And in The Wanderer the sharpness of this particular remembrance is softened by general reflection. Even the famous "'Hwær cwom mearg? Hwær cwom mago? Hwær cwom mæppumgyfa?'' (Wanderer, l. 92) is more dissipated in effect. The keenest moment in The Wanderer is the moment of closeness to one individual, a closeness expressed in physical terms not very different from the images in The Wife's Lament and Wulf and Eadwacer. Corporate feeling can never be presented with this fineness of edge, and this is why the elegies with women subjects achieve a greater intensity.

The two love poems are more obscure than the other elegies because here the poets develop further the allusive technique associated with the lyrical (as opposed to the narrative) form. They focus on the present moment, referring only indirectly to the events which have led up to the speaker's situation, and in the way that the speaker herself would recall them, fragmentarily, and as they relate to the various aspects of the present. Thus, the narrator of Wulf and Eadwacer says, "wena me þine / seoce gedydon, þine seldcymas" (l. 13b-14), and the banished wife, "Ful oft mec her wrape begeat / fromsib
The absence of the loved one is presented as an active agent of torment, causing ever-renewed distress, but the circumstances of that absence must be pieced together from the speaker's hints here and there. The effect is one of greater immediacy and verisimilitude as far as the presentation of feeling is concerned. As Alain Renoir says of Wulf and Eadwacer, "to a point the poem stands apart from its meaning," a remark which is equally true of The Wife's Lament.

Much of the impact of the poems is conveyed by repetition and variation of key themes. In Wulf and Eadwacer, as well as the refrain, there is the repetition of Wulf (l. 4, 9, 13, 17) and the alliterating wen (l. 9 and 13). The linked themes of absence of the loved one and longing for him are similarly stressed in The Wife's Lament. On the one hand, words and phrases suggesting journeying and distance are repeated: "min hlaforf gewat," l. 6, and "ic me feran gewat," l. 9 (the idea of the lord's departure is returned to again in "fromسيپ frean," l. 33); gewidost, l. 13, and wide, l. 46. On the other hand, the theme of sadness and longing is played on in the repetition of geomor and longad, and etymologically related words: geomorre, l. 1; geomor, l. 17; hygegeomorne, l. 19; geomormod, l. 42; longade, l. 14; oflongad, l. 29; longabes, l. 41; langobe, l. 53.

The imagery of the poems is among the most suggestive to be found in Old English. Here, in the
love lyrics, the traditional concomitants of exile are refined and extended. The wife is not merely in a wild place by water, but in a cave which is old and tomblike, enclosing her in a living death, which she contrasts with the vital life and closeness of the lovers she envies. She sighs, "Eald is þes eorðsele, eal ic eom oflongad" (l. 29). The repeated, alliterating vowels draw out the weariness of the line. *Eald* and *eal* hold an echo of *eala!* ("oh!" or "alas!). The *burgtunas* (l. 31) among which the wife dwells suggest imprisonment; the dark woods and high mountains (l. 30), the oppressive confinement of a dungeon; the briars (l. 31) are like fetters. In *Wulf* and *Eadwacer*, the islands are symbols of separation, and the rain, of tears. Literal and symbolic levels are most subtly fused, but the images are presented quite artlessly, and the effect is one of total spontaneity: "Wulf is on iege, ic on operre" (l. 4); "þonne hit wæs renig weder ond ic reotugu sæt" (l. 10).  

Frank Bessai has commented on the different quality of feeling in *The Wife's Lament* as compared to the male elegies, and has seen in the poem a problem of "nascent subjectivity," which the poet attempts to solve by the use of the dual. This is an illuminating observation on the intimacy of *The Wife's Lament*, and also applies to *Wulf* and *Eadwacer*. The dual appears in *The Wife's Lament* in *wit*, 11. 13 and 21; *unc*, 11. 12 and 22; *uncer*, 1. 25. In *Wulf* and *Eadwacer*, the form occurs
in "Uncerne earne hwelp;" 1. 16, and in "uncer giedd geador," 1. 19. The poets are obviously striving for an effect different from that produced by the usual elegiac laments with their male subjects. But the use of the dual is only one of the ways in which this effect is achieved. The lyricism of the two poems is in part to be attributed to their freedom from the extended moralising which characterises the other elegies. Again, the shifts in feeling and focus are more sudden and impulsive in the love poems: witness the confusing alternations between past and present in The Wife's Lament, and the sharp changes in tone in Wulf and Eadwacer. Also, the use of imagery, suggestive and symbolic in the other Old English elegies too, is here at its freest and most subtle in technique and its most far-reaching in connotation.

The treatment of a love relationship in these two poems makes them highly unusual in Old English poetry. Indeed, they are the only poems which treat the theme in a serious and expanded way. In Old English prose, too, this theme is highly unusual. However, there is one work in which it occupies a prominent place: the Old English Apollonius of Tyre. This work is unlike any other fictional narrative in Old English, and in many ways has more in common with the Middle English romances (the earliest of which it precedes by two hundred years), composed first in verse, and, in the late Middle English period, also in prose. The Old English Apollonius
is a translation of a Latin version of the tale, and its Graeco-Roman atmosphere is quite alien to the Anglo-Saxon world. Unlike the Old English poems which adapt Latin material to their own traditions, the Apollonius story remains unassimilated. Its sentimental presentation of a courtship is most uncharacteristic of Old English literature. In particular, its presentation of a courtship in which the lady is the aggressor, albeit in the most modest and decorous way, is totally different from the passivity of the female figures in The Wife's Lament and Wulf and Eadwacer, and is remarkable, even incongruous, in Old English literature. *Apollonius* is a pleasant, but pedestrian romance. In fact, the liveliest section of it is that describing Arcestrate's pursuit of Apollonius. She singles him out for her attentions, and finally indicates that she desires him for a husband. However, there is a sameness in the presentation of her actions: at each stage she appeals to her father for permission, and, encouraged by him, approaches Apollonius. Her behaviour is energetic, but stilted, and her attitude of unvaried eagerness allows no subtlety or depth in characterisation. The only touch of subtlety in the whole romance is the blushing of Apollonius on finding that he is desired. The love story in *Apollonius of Tyre* is interesting and unusual in an Old English context, but incomparably cruder than the treatment of love in the two lyrics, and essentially quite unrelated to it.
Altogether, the two love poems represent a movement towards a more personal and lyrical form, an in-depth study of the feelings of an individual, in a narrow focus, which achieves a greater intensity because of the restrictions upon it. The especial helplessness of women, subject to male guardianship, and male decisions over which they have no control, is an important element in the poems. The anguish of the speakers is particularly acute because they long for the presence of one essential person, and because they are piercingly aware of their inability to change the situation. Like the queens in Beowulf, they are condemned to passivity. It is the combination of the intensity of the speakers' frustration with the singleness of its object that gives these lyrics their peculiar power.

Although the two Old English love poems are rooted in a native genre of elegiac laments, they have a broader affinity with the development of lyricism in European literature at large. The concentration upon personal emotion, without philosophical reflection, which, as we have seen, distinguishes the two love laments from the other elegies, is very rare in English literature before the Conquest; and is normally regarded as a development which only begins to appear later, for instance, in the late twelfth-century St. Godric Songs--simple religious lyrics, and in the thirteenth-century 'spring-song' Sumer is Icumen In. However, lyrical poetry is to be found in
Medieval Latin much earlier than this, at first in the form of hymns and religious lyrics, and from the ninth century or so in secular lyrics of various kinds. From the ninth century onwards, there are also lyrics in the vernacular languages, and 'women's songs,' like The Wife's Lament and Wulf and Eadwacer, seem to have been among the earliest of these. Celtic 'women's songs' survive from the ninth century: the Irish Lament of the Old Woman of Beare (c. 800) and the Welsh laments of Heledd (c. 850). These are not love poems, but elegiac laments with a strong reflective strain, rather similar to the general features of Old English elegy. On the continent, the vernacular lyric first flowers in Provencal towards 1100. Love poems and, in particular, love poems narrated by women, have, of course, appeared in widely separated ages and cultures, but it appears that the Old English love lyrics, rather than being an isolated phenomenon, are, in fact, in the forefront of a movement towards lyricism in medieval Europe.

The Wife's Lament and Wulf and Eadwacer constitute the only erotic poetry in Old English—if we discount the Riddles, which, as shown in Chapter III, show no interest in the portrayal of feeling. In comparison with their, slightly later, continental analogues, the erotic element in the two Old English love lyrics is subdued. Evocative rather than explicit, the Old English lyrics are concerned with the mood itself, and, as we saw, the
events associated with it are obscure. Further, the two love poems are characterised by the understatement typical of Old English verse. In an early Provencal 'woman's song,' the alba In an Orchard under Leaves of Hawthorn, the speaker laments that her lover must leave her at dawn, and reiterates the refrain, "Oh God, the dawn! How soon it comes!" This poem is both more effusive and more direct than the Old English love lyrics. Equally direct, but cynical, is the Latin Huc usque, in which a pregnant unmarried girl describes her humiliation:

Cum vident hunc uterum,  
alter pulsat alterum;  
silent, dum transierim.

Clifford Davidson has made a connection between Wulf and Eadwacer and The Wife's Lament on the one hand and the Latin Cambridge Songs on the other. The latter collection, consisting mainly of tenth- and early eleventh-century material, religious and secular, of German origin, was copied in the monastery of St. Augustine at Canterbury in the eleventh century. Davidson is correct in pointing out that both the Old English lyrics and some of the Cambridge Songs belong to the genre of Frauenlieder, but wrong in thinking that they belong to exactly the same phase of it, either chronologically or artistically. Wulf and Eadwacer and The Wife's Lament are perhaps two hundred years earlier, and quite different in mood. The songs picked out by Davidson for comparison are three short pieces: Veni dilectissime, Nam languens,
These three works, along with the two Old English poems, are linked by Davidson to a genre (women's songs) whose characteristic mythos is defined by the two elements of desire and separation. But the three Latin poems, like the continental poems mentioned earlier, are more sensual in quality than their Old English counterparts. In *Veni dilectissime*, a very brief poem largely obscured by erasure (presumably to censure its erotic content), the speaker tells the beloved, "si cum clave veneris . . . intrare poteris." *Levis exsurgit zephyrus* expresses the theme so familiar in later medieval poetry: the awakening of love in the spring. Here, there is a contrast between the speaker's loneliness and the procreation of the earth:

*Levis exsurgit zephyrus, et sol procedit tepidus,*
*iam terra sinus aperit, dulcore suo diffluit.*

*(stanza 1)*

and:

*Cum mihi sola sedeo et hec revolvens palleo,*
*si forte capud sublevo, nec audio nec video.*

*(stanza 5)*

In *Nam languens*, a stanza interpolated in a longer poem, the woman rises at dawn and goes out barefoot into the snow to watch for her lover's ship. The three Latin poems are, in fact, quite different in tone from the Old English poems with which Davidson compares them. The Latin poems also describe a mood of longing, but the note of anguish which marks the Old English poems is absent. Indeed, only *Levis exsurgit zephyrus* can be said to be a lament. Further,
the imagery of the Old English poems is gloomy and oppressive, in contrast to the milder atmosphere of the Cambridge women's songs, and of the other continental lyrics.

Although The Wife's Lament and Wulf and Eadwacer have features in common with the 'women's songs' mentioned above, the two Old English poems show a greater subtlety and delicacy than their continental analogues. In this respect, they are more akin to the courtly love poetry of the twelfth century and later than to the earlier continental love lyrics. Indeed, in their presentation of feeling, the Old English poems have something in common with the lays of Marie de France, even though there are distinct differences, for the latter are not women's songs, and, in contrast to the gloomy settings of the Old English poems, they share the more genial landscape characteristic of the continental works—and of Middle English lyrics. Nevertheless, in the late twelfth-century lays of Marie de France, as in the Old English love lyrics, the feelings of lovers are presented in evocative and symbolic, rather than direct, terms. Thus, in The Nightingale (Laiistic), the cruel destruction of an innocent love is expressed when the brutish husband kills the nightingale (symbolising the lover) and its blood spatters his wife's dress; and in Chevrefoil, Tristan and Iseult are compared to the honeysuckle entwining the hazel bough. The highly developed, but at the same time subtle
and under-stated, use of symbolism in *The Wife's Lament* and *Wulf and Eadwacer* is similar in its effect, although the overall atmosphere of the poems is widely different, and the elaborate ritual of courtly love, with its secret meetings, messages, exchanges of presents, etc., is quite foreign to the Old English poems.

The two Old English love lyrics, then, spring from the roots of Old English elegy, and it is this which gives them their characteristic vocabulary and imagery. However, the love poems present the elegiac situation in a more intense and intimate way. In so doing, they reflect, and, indeed, foreshadow, an emerging lyricism of which they are among the earliest examples. Moreover, the evocative and introspective nature of the Old English elegy, coupled with the passive situations of the two women narrators in the poems, gives *The Wife's Lament* and *Wulf and Eadwacer* a subtle poignancy which finds its counterpart elsewhere, not in the more nearly contemporary 'women's songs' described above, but in the courtly poetry of the high Middle Ages.
Footnotes

1 The better known elegies (apart from the two poems under consideration) are The Wanderer, The Seafarer, The Ruin, The Husband’s Message, Deor, and the Beowulf elegies, ll. 2231-70 and 2444-62. The Husband’s Message is rather different from the other pieces because it lacks the melancholy inherent in elegy, but it is usually grouped with these poems because it refers to the traditional concomitants of Old English elegiac poetry: feud, and exile across the sea.

2 The dating of the poems is speculative, but it is fairly certain that they belong neither to a decidedly early nor to a late period. R. F. Leslie, in his edition Three Old English Elegies (Manchester, 1961), which contains The Wife’s Lament, The Husband’s Message, and The Ruin, suggests an eighth-century date for all three poems (Introduction, pp. 34-35). Scholars have tended to be silent as to the possible date of Wulf and Eadwacer. Its highly irregular metre, with very long alternating with short lines, and with occasional departures from formal scansion (1. 12 lacks correct alliteration; 1. 13a is minus a syllable) makes it unlikely that the poem belongs to the early period. However, the word forms do not suggest a late date. E.W.S. ie alternates with i, also common in E.W.S., in iège (1. 4), iège (1. 5), and in gife (1. 1) and giedd (1. 19). The i form also appears in meteliste (1. 15). The more characteristically E.W.S. y form appears in hy (11. 2 and 7) and Gehyrest (1. 16). See A. Campbell, Old English Grammar (Oxford, 1959), sec. 300. Hence, the poem is probably to be assigned to the middle period of Old English verse, i.e., to the eighth or ninth century.


4 The poem was first edited by J. J. Conybeare in his Illustrations of Anglo-Saxon Poetry (London, 1826), and subsequently by Benjamin Thorpe in his edition of the Exeter book, Codex Exoniensis (London, 1842). The first person to recognise the poem as the lament of a woman was L. Etmmüller, who printed it under the title "Vreccan vifes ged" in his Engla and Seaxna Scopas and Boceras (Quedlinburg and Leipzig, 1850; rep. Amsterdam, 1966), pp. 214-15. Etmmüller notes the significance of the feminine forms geomorre (1. 1) and "minre sylfre" (1. 2), both of which refer to the speaker (p. 214, notes). The latter qualifies the word sid in 1. 2, but takes its agreement
not from *sið*, a masculine noun, but from the feminine possessor. Thorpe had emended to "minne sylfes."

5 Levin Schücking argued that the first two lines must be a later addition, and that the poem should be taken as the speech of a man. The "geong mon" of li. 42, "Das angelsächsische Gedicht von der Klage der Frau," ZfdA, 48 (1906), 436-49. Fairly recently, Rudolph Bambas revived the male-narrator theory, arguing that a poem about sexual love would be an anachronism in Anglo-Saxon England and that the passionate words "suit the fierce loyalty that existed between a chief and his follower," "Another View of the Old English Wife's Lament," JEGP, 62 (1963), 303-09. Bambas suggests that the feminine forms of the first two lines are either an addition or due to scribal error. Martin Stevens has attempted to explain away the crucial feminine forms, proposing to emend *sið* to *side* and take it as a rare feminine noun in agreement with "minre sylfre," and to read *geomorre* as an adverb, a variant spelling of *geomore*, "The Narrator of The Wife's Lament," NM, 69 (1968), 72-90. All the points martialed by Stevens are met in a thoroughgoing rebuttal by Bruce Mitchell, who shows that basically a grammatical argument against a female speaker will not hold water, and that Stevens "relies on too great a combination of improbabilities," "The Narrator of The Wife's Lament: Some Syntactical Problems Reconsidered," NM, 73 (1972), 222-34.


8 See especially Curry, p. 189. Matti Rissanen, who argues somewhat tentatively for the possibility of a male narrator, proposes an emendation of li. 33b-34 ("Frynd sind on eorðan, / leofe lifgende, leger wærdiað") which will bring them into line with the usual elegiac situation, as seen in *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*. Emending *lifgende* to *licgende*, he reads, "The friends are in the ground, the loved ones lying dead, they dwell in the tomb," "The Theme of 'Exile' in The Wife's Lament," NM, 70 (1969), 95.

9 In his 1842 edition of the Exeter Book, Thorpe printed the poem as a riddle, but offered no solution. Heinrich Leo interpreted Wulf and Eadwacer as a charade on the name "Cynewulf," which he managed to find hidden in the text by manipulating it very freely, Quae de se ipso Cynewulfus . . . tradiderit (Halle,' 1857). The attribution of the "First Riddle" to Cynewulf led to the acceptance of
the entire Exeter Book collection of riddles as the work of that poet, a theory which has long been discarded.
Cf. Chapter III, n. 2.


11 Ibid., p. 198.

12 In 1923, H. Patzig proposed the solution "millstone," "Zum ersten Rätsel des Exeterbuchs," Archiv, 145: 204-07. The solutions suggested for the supposed riddle were numerous, a fact which was itself an argument against the riddle theory.

13 Cf. W. J. Sedgefield, who suggests that the poem is about a female dog and a wolf with whom she has had a love-affair, "Wulf and Eadwacer," MLR, 26 (1931), 74-75; and J. F. Adams, who argues that "Eadwacer" is not a character but an ironic epithet for Wulf, meaning "property-watcher," "Wulf and Eadwacer: An Interpretation," MLN, 73 (1958), 1-5.

14 See Fry, "A Wen Charm," suggesting that the poem is a charm to rid the speaker of wens; and Eliason, "On Wulf and Eadwacer," arguing the "the poem is a private communication addressed to a colleague, ruefully but playfully protesting" that a piece of poetry [composed by the writer and the colleague--his scribe] belonging to them has been split up in a manuscript (p. 228; also see pp. 230-31).

15 Cf. the recommendation in Be Wifmannes Beweddunge that a woman who is to go abroad on her marriage should have a guarantee from her "friends" (i.e., her kin) that they will continue to accept legal responsibility for her, BWW, sec. 7. See Chapter I, p. 29. The speaker in The Wife's Lament is in desperate straits because she has no one to assume responsibility for her. She declares that she has "lyt . . . freonda" (11. 16-17), the conventional Old English poetic understatement for "no friends at all."

16 This is how Kemp Malone interprets these words, "Two English Frauenlieder," p. 113. R. F. Leslie, in his edition, Three Old Elegies, and Jane Curry, in her article on the poem, suggest that 1. 9 refers to the wife's departure in search of her husband. See Leslie, p. 7; Curry, p. 191.

17 See n. 15.

18 The main source of difficulty in 1. 15 is herheard, which is a hapax legomenon. It could be a noun derived
from hear, "temple," "sanctuary," and referring to the cave beneath the oak-tree, in which the wife says elsewhere she is forced to dwell. Taken in this way, the noun would be a "grove-dwelling" with heathen associations. See Krapp and Dobbie, Exeter Book, p. 352 (notes). It is also possible to divide the word and read "her heard," heard referring to the cruel husband, or to emend to "her eard" (see Exeter Book, p. 352). The last reading, which forces alliteration upon the adverb, is less satisfactory, although it is used by Leslie in his text.


W. W. Lawrence attempted to mitigate the picture of the husband presented in 11. 17b-20, and translated "morpor hycgend[n]e" (the n is an emendation) as "mindful of death," "The Banished Wife's Lament," MP, 5 (1907-08), 388-89. But there is a strong element of violence in the word morpor; it does not mean "death" in a general sense. The use of the word could be taken as an exaggeration springing from the speaker's heightened emotional state. Stanley B. Greenfield read "morpor hycgend[n]e" as "plotting a crime"--i.e., the wife's imprisonment, and stressed the husband's cruelty, "The Wife's Lament Reconsidered," PMLA, 68 (1953), 907-12. Greenfield's essay "The Old Elegies," Continuations and Beginnings: Studies in Old English Literature, ed. E. G. Stanley (London, 1966), pp. 165-69, modifies the position adopted in his earlier article.

This is more or less the reading suggested by Greenfield, "The O.E. Elegies," p. 168, and by Kemp Malone, "Two English Frauenlieder," p. 113. The three subjunctives in the passage beginning at 1. 42 ("scyle . . . sy . . . sy") have led these lines to be taken as a curse. The older view held that this was a curse directed against a third person, a "geong mon" (1. 42) responsible for the alienation of the speaker and her loved one. Among more recent scholars, J. A. Ward has adhered to this opinion, "The Wife's Lament: An Interpretation," JEGP, 59 (1960), 26-33. In his article "The Wife's Lament Reconsidered," Greenfield had argued that the passage represented a mild curse directed against the husband (pp. 907-08). The introduction of a third person adds an unnecessary complication to the poem and weakens its total effect. Most scholars now regard this passage as an utterance in gnomic style, though there is disagreement as to whether the "geong mon" who is obliged to be hard of heart and gloomy is the husband--which I believe is the most natural interpretation, the wife, or a "young person" in general.

In his edition, Leslie argues that "mines
felaleofan fæhōu" means "the feud in which my dear one is involved" rather than "the hostility of my dear one" (pp. 6-7). Fæhōu does indeed mean "feud," but the objective genitive is awkward, and a contrast between the wife's love for her husband and his enmity towards her is more pointed here.

23 See Bradley, who thought the poem was a fragment. Lawrence suggested a lacuna between the first and second lines, "The First Riddle of Cynewulf," PMLA, 17 (1902), 251. A more recent critic, Ruth Lehmann, thinks it likely that two lines have been lost before the opening, "The Metrics and Structure of Wulf and Eadwacer," PQ, 48 (1969), 164-65.

24 "Gift" is the only translation of lac that makes sense. However, since there are references to violence and hostility later in the poem ("wælreowe weras," 1. 6), it may well be that the word carries undertones of another meaning, "battle," although "give battle" (rendering "lac gife") is not an Old English idiom.

25 Ungelice in 1. 8.

26 This is one of the alternatives considered by Lehmann (except that she assumes the sentence is a statement, not a question), but she prefers her other alternative, "They will oppress him if he comes at last" (p. 158). Like Lawrence, she detects Norse influence in the poem, and suggests a connection between O.N. abja and abecgan, and between O.N. "i þraut" and "on þraet." Lawrence sees Norse influence also in the unusual metre (pp. 251-54). He relates "on þraet cuman" to "i þraut koma" in the sense of "come into heavy straits," which is more appropriate in the context than "come at last." Lawrence points out other examples of unusual idiom, which he believes are derived from Norse, and suggests that the poem is a translation of a Norse original. The difficult line 2 and 7 has been rendered in several quite different ways: from Bradley's "Will they feed him if he should come to want?" (assuming abecgan is a causative from bicgan), to L. Whitbread's "They will kill him if he comes into their company" (abecgan = "devour"), "A Note on Wulf and Eadwacer," MÆ, 10 (1961), 151.

27 Lehmann finds a systematic distinction between the plural and the dual (used in Uncerne, 1. 16, and uncer, 1. 19) in the poem, and believes that the poet reserves the latter for the speaker and Wulf: "we two against the world" (pp. 159 and 163). Lehmann therefore regards us in line 3 and 8 as a reference to the speaker and her husband. This is ingenious, but a plaintive repetition of the different lots assigned to the speaker.
and her lover makes a more effective reading of the line than does a contrast between Wulf on the one hand, and the speaker and her husband on the other.

28 The alternative translation, "I followed the wanderings of my Wulf with (my) hopes," has the same basic meaning. The unrecorded dogode which appears to mean something like the modern English "dog," is sometimes emended to hogode, "thought about."

29 The passionate distress of these lines, dramatically introduced by the exclamation "Wulf min Wulf," must surely preclude acceptance of any theory which does not read the poem as a poignant lament. The vehemence of the lines is scarcely appropriate to a complaint about wens (Fry's version) or a passage misplaced in the manuscript (Eliason's theory), or a semi-humorous appeal to a wandering husband to settle down to his role of "property watcher" (Adams' reading), or an (entirely humorous?) canine love-story (Sedgefield's suggestion).

30 Alain Renoir notes the shift from passivity to brutal activity in the address to Eadwacer, "Wulf and Eadwacer: A Non-Interpretation," Franciplegius: Medieval and Linguistic Studies in Honor of Francis Peabody Magoun, Jr., eds. J. B. Bessinger, Jr. and R. P. Creed (New York, 1965), p. 157. However, Renoir sees this aggressiveness extending to the end of the poem and making itself felt in verbs of action like beran and toslitan. But the wording of the last sentence as a whole suggests resignation rather than aggression. The closing lines represent one of those gnomic statements which attempt to come to terms with sorrow by generalising it.

31 Earne probably comes from earg, "cowardly," but could also be an error for earmne.


33 See, for instance, Edith Rickert, "The Old English Offa Saga," MP, 2 (1904-05), 29-76 and 321-76.


35 Especially Rudolf Imelmann, who incorporated most of the Old English elegies into a hypothetical saga of a fifth-century Saxon Odoacer mentioned by Gregory of Tours: Die altenglische Odoaker-Dichtung (Berlin, 1907); Forschungen zur altenglischen Poesie (Berlin, 1920); Wanderer und Seefahrer im Rahmen der altenglischen
Odoaker-Dichtung (Berlin, 1908). The Odoacer slain by Theodoric is a more popular contender, proposed, for instance, by Lehmann.

36 The most persuasive of these theories is that put forward by M. J. Swanton, who links The Wife's Lament and The Husband's Message in an interpretation suggesting that the former poem is "an exploration of the relationship between Christ and the Church, which yearns for the re-establishment of a previous union, while the world in its Last Age, after the death and departure of the Man, presents images only of desolation and decay," "The Wife's Lament and The Husband's Message: A Reconsideration," Anglia, 82 (1964), 289-90.

37 The formulaic elements of the exile-theme have been classified by Greenfield. See Chapter II, pp. 73-74 and n. 5. A summary of the most typical features of the exile syndrome is given by Herbert Pilch in his article "The Elegiac Genre in Old English and Early Welsh Poetry," ZfcP, 29 (1964), 211-12.

38 In The Wanderer and The Seafarer, the second half of the poem is devoted to extended moralising (Wanderer, 11. 58-115; Seafarer, 11. 64b-124). It is significant that the touches of generalised reflection in The Wife's Lament (11. 42-45a, and 52b-53--final lines) and Wulf and Eadwacer (11. 18-19--final lines) are in the terser, gnomic manner, rather than in the lengthier, parenetic style, with specific Christian content, as in the two other poems.

39 This is the beginning of an "ubi-sunt" passage (Wanderer, 11. 92-96) which has often been commented upon. There are numerous analogues of distinctly Christian, moralising content.

40 Understatement: Wulf never came. Cf. n. 15 on "lyt . . . freonda" (= "no friends"), Wife's Lament, 11. 16-17. Cf. Also "lyt . . . geholena" (= "no protectors"), Wanderer, 1. 31. The literal meaning of seldycmas, "rare comings," which is the translation accepted by some scholars, gives a much weaker reading. The Old English poetic device of understatement is discussed in an article by F. Bracher, "Understatement in Old English Poetry," PMLA, 52 (1937), 915-34.


42 Compare the way in which these images are rather deliberately spelled out by two nineteenth-century poets. Arnold uses the island imagery in the first stanza of "To Marguerite":
"Yes: in the sea of life enisled,
With echoing straits between us thrown,
Dotting the shoreless watery wild,
We mortal millions live alone."

(The resemblance between Wulf and Eadwacer and "To Marguerite" is also noted by Greenfield, "Old English Elegies," p. 164.) The conceit of "nature's tears" is used in the opening of a poem by Verlaine: "Il pleure dans mon coeur / Comme il pleut sur la ville."


44 Cf. Lehmann's comment on the dual in Wulf and Eadwacer. See n. 27, above.

45 Previously mentioned in Chapter IV, pp. 157-58.

46 A Carolingian capitulary of 789 forbids nuns to write *winileodas*—songs for a lover, thus indicating that such poems were being composed at this time, although they are no longer extant. See Peter Dronke, Medieval Latin and the Rise of European Love-Lyric, 2nd ed., I (Oxford, 1968), 7-8. Of course, we have no way of knowing just how "lyrical" these *winileodas* would have been.

47 The poem is translated from *En un verquier sotz folha d'albespi* in An Anthology of Medieval Lyrics, ed. Angel Flores (New York, 1962), p. 5.

48 Printed in Medieval Latin Lyrics (a collection of poems from the ninth to the twelfth centuries), ed. Brian Stock (Boston, 1971), pp. 58-60.

49 See Introduction, p. 14 and n. 22.


51 Davidson, arguing for a background of erotic poetry in late Anglo-Saxon England, refers to W.L. and W. and E. as tenth-century poems (p. 451), and links them with the copying of the Cambridge Songs in England in the eleventh century. But the two love lyrics are much earlier. See n. 2, above.

52 Printed in Die Cambridger Lieder, ed. Karl Strecker, Mon. Germ. Hist., Scriptores, 3rd ed. (Berlin, 1966), pp. 107-08, 42 (interpolated in Modus Liebinc), and 95, respectively.

53 Davidson, p. 456.
CHAPTER VI

DRAMATIC SCENES INVOLVING WOMEN:

GENESIS B AND CHRIST I

All the female characters discussed so far have been based on the standard stereotypes of Old English poetry. This is true even where the characters go far beyond the traditional stereotype, as do the three queens in Beowulf, and, much more so, the female subjects of The Wife's Lament and Wulf and Eadwacer. In the two passages which will form the subject of the present chapter there is a significant difference, in that a new naturalism is present, which has no basis at all in the stock types on which Old English poets traditionally draw. Both passages have attracted critical attention because of their unusual features, and these features are closely associated with the poets' particular interest in character and emotional situation. One of these passages is the temptation scene in Genesis B; the other is Division VII (sometimes referred to as Lyric VII¹) in the series of expanded Advent antiphons which constitutes Christ I.

Discussion of Genesis B and Christ I as a whole can be dispensed with, since I am concerned here with the characteristics of particular passages, rather than,
as in the previous chapter, with the overall features of the works. As is well known, Genesis B is a later interpolation, based on an Old Saxon original, in the Genesis poem, the rest of which is referred to as Genesis A. Genesis B, which is usually discussed by critics as a separate poem, is distinguished from Genesis A by much greater vividness and dramatic intensity in the presentation of its characters.\(^2\) The lively rendering of the temptation scene parallels an equally lively, though markedly different, depiction of Satan and the fallen angels in hell. Evidently we are dealing with a poet of considerable power.

The Anglo-Saxon redactor may be credited with Genesis B as we have it in Old English, since, although he is highly indebted to his Old Saxon predecessor, he has created a vigorous poem in its own right, rather than merely producing a watered-down version of his original.\(^3\) Further, only a short passage of the temptation scene exists in Old Saxon, so we cannot know just what changes were made by the Old English poet. The Old Saxon Genesis consists of three fragments: a passage from the story of Cain and Abel; another, describing the destruction of Sodom; and a third fragment of twenty-five or twenty-six lines corresponding to part of the Old English Genesis B.\(^4\) The latter work shows throughout, by its unusual vocabulary and its longer-than-normal lines, the influence of the Old Saxon poem. Nevertheless, the rendering is full of
spontaneity and vigour. The Old Saxon fragment corresponds to a speech by Adam to Eve, immediately after the Fall, in which he laments on the miseries that are now in store for them (Genesis B, ll. 790-816). The language of the Old Saxon is very similar to that of the Old English redaction, but the Anglo-Saxon poet has heightened it and made it more flexible. One telling change in detail is the change to the question form in "Gesyhst þu nu þa sweartan helle grædige and gifre," based on "Nu maht thu sean thia suarton hell ginon gradaga." Again, in translation the lengthy Old Saxon verse-line is sometimes shortened and sometimes rendered by two lines. Thus, the Old English version has certainly gone through the "shaping spirit" of the poet's imagination, although the material is not his own.

In Christ I, Division VII, referred to as the "Passus" by Edward Burgert in his discussion of the poem, is the centre of a series of twelve hymnic invocations celebrating the mystery of Christ's Incarnation. The elevated tone appropriate to hymnic utterance is maintained through the Passus, which, like the other divisions, commences with the word Eala, but the distancing and stylisation which mark the other sections are temporarily absent here, and the Passus takes the form of a domestic conversation between Mary and Joseph.

As regards characterisation, in the Genesis B scene the more interesting figure is Eve, and her situation
with its conflict between good intention and evil action springing from feebler intellect, is more complex than Adam's. In the Christ passage the presentation of Joseph (rather than of Mary) is the more complex. It is Joseph who represents human frailty and inability to understand the mysteries of God, and the poet presents this both with criticism and with great sympathy. But, in both passages, the woman plays the dominant role. Eve works upon Adam's feelings until he finally gives way. Mary gently leads Joseph to a proper acceptance of God's acts. The characteristic quality of both scenes is a function of this subtle dominance of the female figure.

One of the most striking features of Genesis B is the poet's heterodox treatment of the Fall of Man. Neither the Old English poet nor his Old Saxon predecessor is to be credited with actually inventing the departures from the usual narrative. However, we should give the Old English poet credit for his imaginative handling of them. The following are the ways in which the Genesis B presentation departs from the regular account: the temptation is undertaken by a subordinate devil; the Tempter masquerades as an angel; he tempts Adam first—unsuccessfully; the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil is dark and ugly; Eve eats the fruit in good faith, thinking she is carrying out God's will; she has a vision of heaven; Adam also eats in good faith; Eve's vision of heaven disappears and she and Adam see instead a vision
of hell.

Although there are literary precedents for these unusual features, the presentation of the Fall is chiefly to be explained by the poet's desire to bring out the dramatic potential of the situation. He treats the Fall as the tragedy of Adam, a tragedy which is seen in essentially ironic terms, and manipulates the scene so as to stress the elements of irony and contrast. The use of a subordinate devil allows the poet to give an ironic inversion of the bond of loyalty between man and God in the hylde (l. 726) between the Tempter and his master, Satan. The ugliness of the Tree of Knowledge makes a pointed contrast with the beauty of the Tree of Life (ll. 467-89a). The deceptive beauty of Eve's false vision of heaven (ll. 600b-09a) with its angel song (described by Eve to Adam, ll. 675b-76a) is in ironic contrast to the later vision of hell (ll. 791-94a) with its sounds of rage. Both spectacles are strikingly palpable, to the ear as well as the eye. But most particularly, the treatment of Adam and Eve is handled so as to bring out to the full the dramatic possibilities of a tragedy in which Adam is the victim and Eve the vehicle of the catastrophe. The poet is concerned with the transgression of Adam, rather than that of Eve. He dwells on the temptation of Adam by Eve and the serpent, while the temptation of Eve is passed over fairly briefly. However, what especially interests him is the potency of Eve as a temptress. This is made all
the more powerful by her complete acceptance of the Tempter's credentials, by her radiant vision of heaven, and by her frank and affectionate attitude to Adam.

The presentation of Eve in the poem is particularly compelling because she sins from ignorance and not from pride. The poet's treatment of Eve shows his interest in the psychological probabilities of the situation. The Tempter enlists Eve's support in his assault upon Adam by convincing her that her efforts at persuasion are sanctioned by God and in her husband's best interest. She makes an energetic and at the same time humble plea which springs from genuine concern.

The author of Genesis B expands upon the temptation scene with great freedom and an especial emphasis upon the relationship between Adam and Eve. Although Adam is the central figure, it is the role of Eve, with its conflict between evil actions and good intentions, that brings out the poet's skill and subtlety. He presents a battle of wills between Adam and Eve, with Eve taking the leading part. This confrontation becomes the high point of tension in the Genesis B poet's version of the Fall, and he focusses upon Eve's prolonged attempt to persuade her husband to eat the fatal apple. The poet conveys a vivid sense of the tremendous pressure brought to bear on Adam by Eve's persuasion, which derives its power from the underlying love between them. Her long speech to him (11. 655-83) is informed with affection, and
the poet stresses her beauty, her eloquence and her good
intentions.

There is a powerful irony in the contrast between
Eve's loyalty, her beauty, and the radiance of her (false)
vision on the one hand, and the dark deed to which she is
persuading Adam on the other. Eve is associated at every
stage with images of ideal light and purity. She is
"idesa scenost, / wifa wligost" (ll. 626-27a), words
which are repeated in lines 700b to 701a, and, when she
realises the dire consequences of what she has done, in
lines 821b to 822a. On the same occasions, the poet refers
to her as "God's handiwork" (ll. 628, 702, 822), which
she is in the most literal sense. The same ideas of
shining radiance and of the perfection associated with
God's handiwork appear in the false vision as seen through
her eyes. The vision is of such a nature:

\[\text{pæt hire puhte hwitre heofon and eorðe,} \\
\text{and eall þeos woruld wligre, and geweorc godes} \\
micel and mihtig, \ldots \]
\[\text{(ll. 603-05a)}\]

Eve addresses Adam with affection and goodwill:

"Adam, frea min, þis ofet is swa swete, \\
blīðe on breostum, and þes boda sciene, \\
godes engel god, \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \\
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\ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \\nHis [God's] hylde is unc betere \\
to gewinnanne þonne his wiðermedo. \\
\text{(ll. 655-60)}\]

The artless simplicity of Eve's words makes them all the
more persuasive from Adam's point of view, and all the more
ironic from the point of view of the audience or reader.
Eve's subsequent description to Adam of her vision (ll. 673b-76a) is particularly forceful because the poet has already made us feel its genuine power over her.

The poet vividly suggests Adam's situation as the victim of incessant and mounting pressure:

Hi spræc him picce to and speon hine ealne dæg
on þa dimman dæd þæt hie drihtnes heora
willan bræcon. Stod se wraða boda,
legde him lustas on and mid listum speon,
fylgde him frecne.

(ll. 684-88a)

The impression of unremitting verbal assaults prolonged for a whole day is compressed into a single line (684). Eve's persuasive words come "thickly," an adverb which is repeated in line 705 (piclice) and suggests the energy and volubility of her appeals. By the time the poet says that Adam is beginning to capitulate (ll. 705-06a) we share with him the sense of being irresistibly driven to it. The tension between Adam and Eve, always overshadowed by the presence of the Tempter, is conveyed with great skill. And the irony which creates this tension is pointed to in the contrast between the brightness of Eve, repeatedly described as "idesa scienost," and the "dim" deed to which she urges Adam. This contrast is as sharp, though not as extended and explicit, as that between Eve's "holdne hyge" and the "helle and hinnsið" which Adam received at her hands (ll. 708-23a).

The presentation of the two after the Fall is a gentle one, and the poet shows a special sympathy for Eve.
The mutual affection which has been the couple's undoing becomes a vehicle of pathos. The bond of love which was a source of tension when Eve used her influence to sway Adam is now the source of a new unanimity. The poet reiterates the idea of their closeness in the words "sinhiwan somed" (ll. 778 and 789) and "bu tu ætsomme" (l. 847), as Adam and Eve pray to God together (ll. 777b-78a, and l. 847) and discuss their plight together (ll. 788b-89). The implication is that their alienation from God and sense of isolation in the world have made them rely more upon one another. The poet's sympathetic insight also appears in Adam's understandable outburst that he wishes he had never set eyes on Eve (ll. 819-20), and in Eve's meek reply. She speaks with the same affection and loyalty that she showed before, addressing her husband as "wine min Adam" (l. 824) and saying that his remorse cannot be greater than her own. There is now a strong element of pathos in the contrast between her perfection and her sin: "hie wæs geweorc godes, / þeah heo þa on deofles cræft bedoren wurde" (ll. 822b-23).

*Genesis B* has frequently been compared with *Paradise Lost*, and it has been suggested that Milton was indebted to the Old English poem, although most would now regard the similarity as coincidental. The obvious resemblance lies in the impressive presentation of Satan, but it is interesting to note that there are parallels in the treatment of Adam and Eve after the Fall, especially
in the pathetic presentation of Eve. Milton, like the Genesis B poet, presents Eve's humble repentance with great gentleness and sympathy:

"Forsake me not thus, Adam, witness Heav'n
What love sincere, and reverence in my heart
I beare thee, and unweeting have offended."20

(X, 914-16)

In Paradise Lost, too, the poet focusses on the couple's affection in the face of adversity, and it is this note of muted pathos that informs the closing lines of the poem: "They hand in hand with wandring steps and slow, /
Through Eden took their solitary way" (XII, 648-49). Again, in both poems the new closeness of Adam and Eve is associated with repentance. The resemblances between the two poems are quite striking, although they are probably to be attributed, not to actual borrowing, but to a similar imaginative insight into the human situation involved here. Indeed, the Genesis B poet shows the greater psychological consistency, in that the pathos of his Eve after the Fall is a natural extension of her simple good-nature beforehand.

In his account of the human Fall, the Genesis B poet has imaginatively entered into the psychology and motivation which would activate it. There is a remarkable intimacy in his handling of the temptation scene which contrasts with his equally vigorous but more grandiose and archetypal presentation of the 'exile' figure of Satan in hell.21 The poet has attempted to
recreate the situation in which the temptation of Adam would be most potent and most tragic. The result is his characterisation of Eve, the more powerful a temptress simply because she is loved and innocent. In speaking of the tragic quality of *Genesis B*, J. M. Evans has compared the Fall of Man in the Old English poem with the tragedy of Oedipus. A comparison could also be made with another famous tragedy: that of Othello. The parallel lies, not between Adam and Othello, but between Eve and Desdemona. Like the *Genesis B* poet's Eve, Shakespeare's Desdemona is the loved and loving, and also the innocent vehicle of her husband's tragedy. Thus, the sense of tragic waste created in *Genesis B* is similar to that in Shakespeare's play.

In the Passus section of *Christ I*, there is an equally imaginative, although shorter, presentation of the relationship between two people at a moment of crisis: Mary and Joseph after the conception of Christ. Again, it is the woman who plays the active part in the scene, although the man is the centre of interest. Whereas the *Genesis B* poet develops the dramatic possibilities of the temptation scene, in Division VII of *Christ I* the poet actually enters the dramatic form, by allowing his characters to speak for themselves without intervening commentary. The earlier scholars made much of this, and saw the passage as a precursor of the miracle play, but modern critics are more cautious. However, the dialogue
between Mary and Joseph is certainly conceived in dramatic terms, and in this respect is unique in extant Old English. The Advent antiphons on which Christ I is based have inherent dramatic properties, but these are not realised in the remainder of the poem. Indeed, Division VII is not based on any specific antiphon, a fact which may well have a bearing on the difference between this and the other sections, and the greater naturalism present here. The vigorous dramatic dialogue of the Passus is evidently the same kind of spontaneous response to a confrontation both intimate and vehement as we saw in the temptation scene of Genesis B.

Division VII of Christ I treats "the iconological motif known to art historians as 'the doubting of Mary.'" Joseph becomes aware that Mary is pregnant, and concludes that she has been guilty of inchastity. He is troubled in his mind, since he loves her and had thought her pure. Now he is faced with the painful choice of either giving her up to be stoned, or condoning what he regards as a crime. In response to his outburst, Mary expresses grief at his distress, and goes on to describe the mystery of the Virgin Birth.

The analogues brought forward by Albert Cook show that the Passus has its basis in early patristic expansions of the scriptural account found at the beginning of the Gospel of St. Matthew (1:18-21). Cook translates extracts from five homilies which present a similar scene in
dialogue form: (Pseudo-) Athanasius, (Pseudo-) Chrysostom, (Pseudo-) Proclus, Germanus, and (Pseudo-) Augustine. However, there is a great difference between the Old English passage and the homiletic dialogues quoted by Cook. The edifying purpose of the latter works is very prominent. They are sprinkled with references to the Old Testament—the Mosaic law, which Mary appears to have violated, and the Prophets, whose predictions are now being fulfilled. With the exception, to a certain extent, of the Germanus, these dialogues are all stilted, and not at all naturalistic. The (Pseudo-) Proclus is an exchange of brief sententious utterances, while the other three consist of very long and very stiff speeches.

The final, explicitly didactic speech of Mary is somewhat in the manner of the Latin dialogues, but the remainder of the exchange between Mary and Joseph is full of personal feelings and reactions. In this respect, the Passus is quite different in quality from the homiletic dialogues, and from the rest of Christ I. Division IV, "Eala wifa wynn," regarded by Jackson Campbell as possibly a rudimentary example of the same genre as the Passus, lacks this personal note. The two speeches (that of the sons and daughters of Salem and that of Mary) are formal and stylised in the extreme. It is clear that the situation involving Mary and Joseph has inspired the poet to a naturalistic scene different from the usual analogues and from the remainder of the Advent series.
The Passus is obviously a dialogue between Mary and Joseph, but there is no complete agreement as to which lines should be assigned to the respective speakers. The standard arrangement, following Cook's edition, is the most satisfactory: lines 164 to 167a are given to Mary, and lines 167b to 176a to Joseph, lines 176b to 181a to Mary, and lines 197 to 213 to Mary again, after the poet's intervention. It is the section of the dialogue between lines 167b and 195a which causes the difficulty. Cook's arrangement is the most convincing, because it assigns to Joseph all those passages expressing anxiety and emotional disturbance. It is appropriate that Mary should be concerned about Joseph's agitation, but any kind of mental turmoil is out of keeping with her especial purity and grace.  

The mystery of the Virgin Birth is a theme which runs through the Advent sequence of Christ I, and forms the subject of Division VII. In this division, the poet is concerned not with the ultimate effect upon mankind in general of Christ's miraculous conception, but with its immediate effect upon the two individuals most closely connected with it. The sequence as a whole, like the antiphons upon which it is based, expresses a typological view of the Incarnation, and many of the sections focus on images from the Old Testament, which are interpreted in terms of Christ's coming to man. Thus, Division I is based on the Cornerstone image from the Psalms.
II on the Key of David from Isaiah, Division III on Jerusalem, the City of God, etc. Both Robert Burlin and Roger Lass, who have studied the sequence in terms of its typological imagery, note that the poem operates on different levels, and that Division VII represents the most intimate and immediate of these. Although the main themes of the poem have a transcendental significance, the Passus represents a sharp close-up which contrasts with the surrounding sections. Unity is preserved by the overall hymnic style, conveyed especially through the use of repeated apostrophes. But the ritual chant and apostrophe which form the stuff of the antiphons are developed in quite a different direction in Division VII. The personal quality of the Passus is its striking feature. the transcendental implication is subdued here, and the immediate effects are to the fore. The great typological images which suggest the existence of eternal truths are largely absent in this division. Only in Mary's closing speech, which rises again to the transcendental plane, do they make an appearance. Taking up Joseph's statement that he received a pure maiden from the temple (11. 186-87), Mary says that now she has become God's temple, for the Holy Ghost has taken up its dwelling in her (11. 206b-08a). This image has two typological referents, for Mary is the habitation of the Holy Ghost in being the bearer of Christ, and also she is the type of the good Christian, who carries the Holy Spirit within him.
The action of the Passus takes place within a very short space of time: the crucial moment when Joseph voices his suspicions and Mary sets them to rest. As in Genesis B, the major action, in this case the enlightenment of Joseph, is initiated by the woman. In the figure of Mary, the poet achieves a nice balance between the modest simplicity of a young girl and the divine wisdom of one chosen and inspired by God. Tension builds up through the scene, becomes acute in the long second speech of Joseph, and is resolved in Mary's final speech. In this the mood changes from emotional crisis to tranquillity, in preparation for the next division, "Eala þu sóða ond þu sibsuma [cyning]." The poet omits any explanation of the circumstances leading up to the scene, and Mary's opening words make it clear that Joseph has already declared his intention to put her away. In her first speech she says, "nu þu . . . scealt . . . alætan lufan mine," i.e., "Must you give up my love?" Her words convey her respect for Joseph, which stems from her sense of his great position in history, and she addresses him as "Iacobes bearn, / mæg Dauides" (ll. 164b-65a).

Joseph's reply, which is confused and disjointed, reflects the troubled state of his mind: he is, he says, "suddenly distressed" because he has heard words of accusation against her (ll. 167b-72a). The implication is that the blunt words of others have forced him to accept a painful reality that can no longer be passed over. He goes
on to say that he cannot help shedding tears (ll. 172b-73a), and then, abruptly, adds:

"God eape mæg
gehælan hygesorge heortan minre,
afrefran feasceafne, . . ."37

and ends with a cry of grief, "Eala fæmne geong, / mægð Marial" He laments the disgrace of the "maiden young, Mary the virgin."

Mary's innocence asks only for further explanation. She has not grasped the significance of his words, and thinks his agitation suggests that he himself has done something shameful. She encourages him by saying that she has never found any fault in him. It seems that she thinks he has been blaming himself, because of unkind words from outsiders, for betrothing a young girl (Joseph himself being an aged man).38

Joseph now comes out directly with the reason for his agitation. He is tormented not only by the painful fact of Mary's unchastity, but by the situation of agonising helplessness and indecision in which this places him. He has no answer to those who vilify her (ll. 183-85a). In feeling words he describes his dilemma: "Me nawper deag, / secge ne swige" (ll. 189b-90a). If he speaks, she will be stoned, but if he keeps silent it will be even worse ("Gen strengre," l. 192b), because a vile act will have been condoned. He uses words applicable to the accesory, manswara, in a crime, morbor (l. 193). Covering up Mary's guilt will make him "fracoð in folcum" (l. 195).
As Campbell says, "His struggle is between his deepest personal desires [to love and protect Mary] and his strongest convictions of a moral nature."\textsuperscript{39}

Mary's subsequent speech is different in tone. Whereas Joseph's speeches were a reflection of conflicting feelings, here we have a speech which reflects simple assurance and higher knowledge. Mary describes the Annunciation and Virgin Birth, and then urges Joseph to put aside his grief and give thanks for the honour of being the worldly father of Christ, in whom prophecy has been fulfilled. The speech combines the intimacy appropriate to a direct address to Joseph with the formality demanded by the subject, a mystery which Mary reveals to us as well as him.

In only fifty lines, the poet has skilfully presented a situation involving a whole range of interrelated thoughts and feelings. He has described an emotional crisis and its resolution, and his portrayal of the conflicting feelings experienced by Joseph is particularly vivid. In comparison with the account of the Fall in \textit{Genesis B}, the crisis of feeling described by the \textit{Christ I} poet is more complex and more concentrated.

Both passages are significant in that they show two poets responding in a fresh way to the demands of a situation not provided for by the standard character-types of Old English poetry. The two biblical scenes, like the situations in the secular love lyrics, involve a
presentation of love between the sexes, a theme hardly ever given expanded treatment in Old English. In Genesis B and Christ I, of course, the emphasis is not upon the love relationship itself, but it is this factor which colours the whole situation, and gives a strong undercurrent to the argument which forms the subject of the scenes. The confrontation between husband and wife is the more intense because of their deep affection for one another. Again, in both scenes there is a tension between the respectful humility of the female figure--appropriate to her wifely role--and the energy of her will, voiced in eloquent persuasion. The attitude of Eve and Mary to their respective husbands reflects the position of the wife in the Anglo-Saxon laws, and the vassal-like relationship of wife to husband commented on in Chapters I and III, and seen in the language used by the banished wife in Chapter V. The humility of Eve and Mary may also be compared with the passivity of the Beowulf queens and the women speakers in the love lyrics. In both the temptation episode of Genesis B and Division VII of Christ I, the key position of a female figure in an intimate situation leads to a rendering of the scene which is both strikingly dramatic and strikingly naturalistic. There is the same psychological insight which we saw in the love lyrics, but whereas the portrayal of mood in the latter was stylised and symbolic, and still very much influenced by the conventions of the exile theme,
here the presentation is full of realism, and even freer and more flexible in its handling of its material. The poets' departure from the usual sources encourages an imaginative identification with the thoughts and feelings of their characters. This freedom of response is most marked in the fully dramatic—and very vivid—presentation of the dialogue in the Passus scene.

In one or two other passages of Old English poetry, there is a dramatic potential in the inter-relationship between a man and a woman, but this potential remains unrealised. The Waldere fragments present such a situation, but, as remarked in Chapter III, it is impossible to tell just how the poet intended to handle the Walther story. In Fragment I, as we have it, the speech of Hildegund is powerfully eloquent, but contains nothing to make it different from the sort of utterance we might expect of any loyal retainer. In Deor, there is a reference to the feelings of Beaduhild about Weland, but the poet is interested only in Beaduhild's present distress, and not in any conflict of personalities that may have taken place before.

It is significant that the passages where this kind of relationship is treated in a personal and naturalistic way are in the biblical poetry, and not in the male-oriented world of the secular verse. In Christ and Satan, Eve makes a brief but touching appeal to Christ when he harrows hell. She stretches out her hands to him,
and begs for mercy "þurh Marian had" (l. 436). Eve's plea is that Christ was himself born of her daughter (ll. 437-38). The vivid introduction of Eve at this point momentarily brings a warmer, more human note into the poem, but the scene is not developed.

Finally, in Genesis A, the extended account of Abraham necessarily involves Sarah and her jealousy of Hagar. The strong feelings involved retain some of their vitality, as the poet describes Sarah's bitter words to Abraham, and her ill-treatment of the maidservant, Hagar:

"Ne fremest þu gerysnu and riht wið me. Þafodest þu gena þæt me þeowmennen, drehte dogora gehwam dædum and wordum." (ll. 2247-51)

and:

þa wearð unblic& Abrahames cwæne, hire worcþeowæ wrað on mode, heard and hreðe. (ll. 2261-63a)

Although at least one critic has found the presentation of Sarah most lively, and on a par with that of Eve in Genesis B, it seems to me that while the latter is a most feeling adaptation of its sources—Old Saxon and Old Testament—the characterisation in Genesis A is little more than a mechanical paraphrase, which only weakens the vigour of the biblical account.

The interaction between individual men and women on a private level is not a subject that has found much place in Old English heroic poetry. The traditional,
secular poetry draws almost exclusively on a world of collective, male relationships. And when the Old English poets draw on the Bible, which does contain many more domestic situations, they tend to pick out those episodes which can be treated in heroic terms. But Eve and Mary are absolutely central to the Christian mythology, and the poets treating man's Fall and Redemption at times focussed, perhaps by accident, on these female figures. A poet imaginatively recreating the situation of either could not do so in the traditional heroic stereotypes, because these were not applicable, and so he was forced to fall back on his own invention and intuition. In the case of the respective authors of Christ I and Genesis B, we find poets gifted with human insight and a sense of drama. These factors lead to the unusually individualised treatment of Mary and Joseph, and of Adam and Eve. Although the narrative framework may have been provided by sources, the sympathetic creation of characters and their interaction is the Anglo-Saxon poets' own. In these scenes, both the male and female characters are executed with great vigour and realism, but it is the woman who takes the lead and sets the tone. It is because of her central significance that the poets are led into a new exploitation of relationships as highly charged as those of the traditional heroic poetry, but more intimate and more complex.

The quality of the temptation scene in Genesis B and of Division VII in Christ I is indeed dramatic. The
Anglo-Saxon authors of these poems were not the first persons to be aware of the dramatic potential in such material, as is indicated by the existence of the dramatic dialogues on which the "Passus" scene is based. However, the Old English poets show an interest in character and in domestic realism which makes their works quite different from their earlier and near-contemporary analogues. Other early medieval writers conceived the idea of using a dramatic form to present biblical and hagiographical narratives. In tenth-century Germany, Hrotsvitha wrote saints' plays in conscious imitation of the manner of Terence. But the virgin heroines in her plays are, like those in the saints' lives discussed in Chapter IV, very much the vehicle for didactic principles. In fact, her drama is quite crude, and wooden in its characterisation, although sometimes enlivened by a cumbrous humour, most conspicuously in *Dulcitius*, where the hero of that name embraces sooty pots and pans in mistake for the virgins who are the objects of his lust.

It is to the vernacular drama that we must turn for comparable liveliness and realism. The fact that the temptation scene in *Genesis B* and that in the Anglo-Norman *Mystère d'Adam* show similarities is significant, not only in shedding light on the origin of the former, but also with regard to its dramatic properties, for, like the author of the later play, the Anglo-Saxon poet has realised the dramatic potential of his material, although he has
not rendered it in actual dramatic form. Again, the
dialogue between Joseph and Mary constitutes a scene that
reappears, often poignantly treated, in the later mystery
plays. Indeed, the presentation of human interaction in
the temptation scene and the Passus scene has, in its
insight into domestic conflict, something in common with
the homely realism of the Wakefield Master—for instance,
in his treatment of Noah and his wife. The naturalism
of these scenes in Genesis B and Christ I points forward
to a similar naturalism in the Middle English mystery
cycles, where, too, the archetypal events of biblical
history are recreated in simple human terms.
Footnotes

1 Jackson J. Campbell edited Christ I under the title of The Advent Lyrics of the Exeter Book (Princeton, 1959). The three parts of Christ, now generally regarded as quite separate works, open the series of long religious poems which constitutes the first half of the Exeter Book. As Campbell's title implies, he regards the various divisions of Christ I as distinct poems. However, most scholars see sufficient unity in the sequence to regard it as a single work. Cf. Robert Burlin, The Old English Advent: A Typological Commentary (New Haven and London, 1968). Burlin regards Campbell's fragmentation of the series as "regrettable" (p. ix; see also p. 39).


3 Timmer suggests that Genesis B was rendered from the original around the year 900 by one of the Old Saxon clergymen whom Alfred drew from abroad (Introduction, p. 43).

4 The O.S. fragment is included in Klaeber's edition: The Later Genesis and Other Old English and Old Saxon Texts relating to the Fall of Man, 2nd ed. (Heidelberg, 1931).


6 The Dependence of Part I of Cynewulf's Christ upon the Antiphonary (Washington, 1921).

7 Most of the twelve divisions of Christ I are based on antiphons sung in the Advent season, the Advent O's. No specific source has been found for Division VII, and Dom Edward Burgert suggested that in Division X the poet had compiled his own "O," The Dependence of Part I of Cynewulf's Christ upon the Antiphonary (pp. 37-43). Division XI may be based on two Trinity antiphons, see A. S. Cook, The Christ of Cynewulf (Boston, 1900), p. 108. Division XII is based on a text sung at Vespers in the Vigil of the Octave of Christmas (see Samuel Moore, "The Source of Christ 416 ff.", MLN, 29 [1914], 226-27). Cook dated Christ I from the Cynewulfian signature in Christ II, believing the three parts of Christ to form a single poem. Campbell is very cautious in dating, but favours the late ninth century (p. 42).

The beginning of Christ I is missing. Campbell is unwilling to draw any conclusions as to what may have been lost (see pp. 9-11), but other scholars have thought it likely that expansions of one or more of the other Advent antiphons may have formed the missing section (see Cook, p. 73; Burgert, p. 49).
This subject has been discussed by J. M. Evans, "Genesis B and Its Background," RES, N.S., 14 (1963), 1-16, and 113-23. Evans includes substantially the same analysis of Genesis B in his book, Paradise Lost and the Genesis Tradition (Oxford, 1968), Chapter V, pp. 143-67. The question of sources is also dealt with by Rosemary Woolf, "The Fall of Man in Genesis B and the Mystère d'Adam," Studies in Old English Literature in Honor of Arthur G. Brodeur, ed. Stanley B. Greenfield (Eugene, 1963), pp. 189-99. Both Evans and Woolf regard the Old Saxon poet as the author of Genesis B, but this does not affect the relevance of their comments. Evans believes that the poet has been primarily influenced by the narrative technique of Germanic epic ("Genesis B and Its Background," pp. 113-23), although he also allows for the influence of theological precedents: Jewish apocrypha, the earliest fathers, and—he thinks the most likely influence—the Christian Latin poets, Avitus, Cyprian, and Victor ("Genesis B and Its Background," pp. 1-16). Woolf comments on the resemblances between Genesis B and the twelfth-century Anglo-Norman Mystère d'Adam, and suggests that these works must have a common source stemming from "the apocryphal imagination of the East" (p. 188).

Evidently this notion was not uncommon among the Anglo-Saxons. A homily of Ælfric speaks of the devil sending "another devil" in the form of a serpent. See B. Thorpe, The Homilies of the Anglo-Saxon Church, I (London, 1844), 13:194.

The poet does at times refer to the Temptor as a serpent (ll. 491 and 590), but at other times it is clear that he is in the likeness of an angel. Eve refers to him as "bes boda sciene, / godes engel god" (ll. 656b-57a). Woolf notes this variation and believes that the poet himself imagines the devil in an orthodox way but that the source used presents the Tempter disguised as an angel. She points out that the illustrator of the manuscript first depicts the Tempter as a serpent and subsequently as an angel (p. 190).

See Evans and Woolf.

Evans emphasises the way in which the poet has made a point of stressing the good intentions of the guilty pair (pp. 113-15) and the contrast between intent and action. He notes that the resulting effect resembles that "in certain kinds of tragedy," and compares Adam and Eve in Genesis B with Oedipus. With regard to the kind of tragedy found in Genesis B, Evans states, "The deed, it insists, was evil, and the deed is all that matters; the motives, the moral guilt or innocence of the agents, are totally irrelevant, for the law is implacable and a certain action will be
followed by certain consequences . . ." (p. 15).


14 In the Introduction to his edition, Timmer states that "the poet does not use the motive of vainglory and gluttony, but he makes Eve the victim of the demon's lies" (p. 58). See also S. H. Gurteen, The Epic of the Fall of Man (New York and London, 1896), p. 216; W. P. Ker, The Dark Ages (London, 1904; rep. 1955), p. 259; E. Sievers, Der Heliand und die angelsächsische Genesis (Halle, 1875), p. 22. Woolf believes that the poet's treatment, though unusual, is not actually heterodox. She argues that the Tempter appeals to Eve's pride by suggesting that she is in a position to influence Adam (gestyran, 1. 568). Woolf suggests that Eve is thus tempted towards envy and emulation of Adam, rather than of God, as in the Bible. She concludes that "the devil's disguise was not impenetrable, and that Eve listened with a willful credulity springing from nascent vanity" (p. 196). However, Eve's desire to influence her husband for his own good is a manifestation of affectionate concern rather than of pride.

15 Although Woolf disagrees with most critics in her interpretation of Eve's motives, she acknowledges that the poet has approached his subject in a striking way, "from the psychological rather than from the dogmatic point of view" (p. 188). Cf. Evans: "His [the poet's] departure from orthodox patristic views on the Fall reveals him to have been a man less interested in doctrinal niceties than in telling a vivid and moving story . . ." (p. 16).

16 Eve's pleading does not show a desire for an unnatural mastery over her husband, as Woolf thinks (see pp. 195-96). Cf. n. 14, above.

17 There is a slight variation in 1. 789, where the poet says that the two spoke many "sorhworda somed, sinhivan twa."

18 Timmer discusses the possibility of a connection between Genesis B and Paradise Lost in the Introduction to his edition (pp. 60-65), and comes to the conclusion that it is highly unlikely Milton had read or would have been
able to read the contents of the Junius manuscript, which contains *Genesis*.

19 Milton's treatment of the temptation is, of course, rather different.


21 There is a great contrast between the comparatively homely speeches of Adam and Eve and the grand rhetoric of Satan:

"Wa la, ah_te, ic minra handa geweald
and moste ane tid ute weordan,
wesan ane winterstunde, þonne ic mid þys werode—
Ac liþgað me ymbe irenbenda,
rídeo ræcántan sal. Ic eom rícæs leas;
..."

(11. 368b-72)

22 See n. 12, above.

23 At the beginning of his article, "A Remote Analogue to the Miracle Play," *JEGP*, 4 (1902), 421, Cook cites Conybeare (1826), Wülker (1885), Gollancz [1892], and Stopford Brooke [1892] as holders of this opinion. Cook notes that Brooke retracts in a footnote. Campbell, the most recent editor of *Christ I*, comments on the poet's intervention to introduce the last of the speeches, and observes:

"It is merely the absence of these speech introductions [in the remainder of the Passus] that has led people to entangle themselves in dramatic theories about the poem. If the other speeches were thus introduced, this would be a fragment of conversation not greatly different from many we have in the Old English narrative poems" (p. 25, n. 7).

24 Burgert thought it likely that Division VII was an interpolation. See his summary of the sources of *Christ I*, p. 47. However, Division VII is well integrated into the rest of *Christ I* by being couched in the same "hymnic" tone. It is therefore not necessary to explain its rather striking differences as the result of interpolation.


26 "A Remote Analogue to the Miracle Play," pp. 421-51. Burlin mentions the apocryphal *Protoevangelium* or Book of *James* in which the "doubting of Mary" begins to take on "something of the appearance of the Old English dialogue" (p. 116). The *Protoevangelium* lies behind the homiletic dialogues cited by Cook (see Burlin, p. 117).
Cook is inclined to accept the putative authorship of these homilies, since the only reason for their exclusion from the authorial canon is their unusual feature of containing these dialogues (see p. 424).

See Campbell, edition, p. 22. In this "O," the sons and daughters of Salem ask Mary to expound the mystery of the Virgin Birth, and she replies.

Burlin follows the arrangement of P. J. Cosijn, who divides the material between 11. 164 and 195 into two speeches, beginning "Eala Joseph min" (l. 164) and "Eala fæmne geong" (l. 175b) respectively, "Anglosaxonica IV," PBB, 23 (1898), 109-30. See Burlin, pp. 119-21; also Campbell, p. 92. The argument behind this arrangement is that the exclamation Eala is regularly used at the opening rather than at the close of a speech. Burlin argues further that the rapid interchange effected by the standard arrangement is uncharacteristic of Germanic poetry (p. 119). Still other arrangements have been proposed by S. B. Hemingway, "Cynewulf's Christ, 173-176," MLN, 22 (1907), 66-73; and by Neil Isaacs, "Who Says What in Advent Lyric VII?" Structural Principles in Old English Poetry (University of Tennessee Press, 1968), pp. 93-99. The traditional arrangement, following Cook, has recently been defended by J. M. Foley, "Christ 164-213: A Structural Approach to the Speech Boundaries in 'Advent Lyric VII,'" Neophil, 59 (1975), 114-18.

Psalm 117:22 (Vulgate).

Isaiah 22:22.

Burlin, who uses musical terminology to describe the structure of the poem, finds three modes of expression: theological, figurative, and dramatic, the middle of these mediating between the doctrinal abstraction of the first and the concrete immediacy of the third. He regards both Division IV, "Eala wifa wynn," and Division VII as examples of the dramatic mode (pp. 174-75), but, as I observed earlier, Division IV is actually far more stilted than Division VII. Lass's interpretation of the poem's structure captures the significance of Division VII very accurately. He sees the poem as operating on two levels of time, the eternal and the historical, and Division VII as "Essentially an imaginative recreation in an historical mode of the dialogue between Joseph and Mary, as human beings." He continues: "This [the dialogue] occupies almost the center of the sequence as we now have it, and is important because of its focus on the purely human aspects of the mystery of the Incarnation," "Poem as Sacrament: Transcendence of Time in the Advent Sequence from the Exeter Book," Annuale Medievale, 7 (1966), 12.
Something of dramatic quality, which I designate by the word 'hymnic,' is present throughout the poem. Cf. Campbell: "His [the poet's] is most often a singing mode, and he often presents a state of exalted emotion" (Campbell himself terms this quality lyric), "Structural Patterns in the Old English Advent Lyrics," ELH, 23 (1956), 255. There is, of course, more than a germ of drama in the liturgy, of which the Advent sequence of Christ I is an outgrowth.

Cf. Earl R. Anderson, "In the course of the lyric [Division VII], Mary changes from a doubtful woman to a magisterial authority . . ." "Mary's Role as Eiron in Christ I," JEGP, 70 (1971), 234.


The sentiment expressed in these lines (173b-75a) is thought more appropriate to Mary by some scholars (Cosijn, Hemingway, Burlin), but giving the lines to Mary involves either emending "heortan minre" to "heortan binre" or feasceaftne to feasceafte. However, Joseph is presented throughout this scene as an inherently good man, and it is quite convincing that in his distress he should remind himself of his trust in God.

Campbell thinks that Mary fails to realise Joseph is accusing her because she has not registered the words "for þe" (1. 169) in Joseph's speech (see edition, p. 23), but it is not necessary to introduce this complication if we interpret her reaction in the way I describe.

Advent Lyrics, p. 24.

Cf. Chapter II, n. 9, and Chapter V, p. 173. Cf. also the love between the Geat and Mæthild in Deor, also mentioned in Chapter V (p. 173).


She states this explicitly in one of her prefaces. See Hrosvithae Opera, ed. H. Homeyer (Munich, Paderborn, and Vienna), 1970, p. 233.

44 See n. 8, above.

CONCLUSION

We have now surveyed the different kinds of female characterisation to be found in Old English poetry. It can be seen that the major tendency in the presentation of character (both male and female) is towards conformity to a stereotype. The character-types which occur in the poetry fall fairly readily into certain well defined groups. Some of the more impressive figures fail to conform to any of the classical stereotypes, but, on closer examination, we nearly always find that they either present an unusual combination of stereotypes, or that their distinct and stylised features suggest that they belong to a type not elsewhere recorded in the extant corpus of Old English poetry. Such figures are especially prevalent in Beowulf, a fact which may be attributed partly to the superior skill of the poet, and partly to the circumstance that this is the only preserved Old English poem of any length based on traditional Germanic legend. Only occasionally does a poet present an unusual detail, or a particularly individual relationship between character and action. It is a striking fact that most of the passages in which the poets have attempted to enter into the mind of a character in a certain situation, and to reach the well-springs of that character's thoughts and actions, are
passages involving female figures. In the preceding chapters, I have examined these passages in detail. I shall now attempt to formulate an explanation for the unusual insight which was their common feature.

As we have seen, the roles played by women in the poetry correspond to their roles in real life: the formal but passive part played by the queen; the vassal-like relationship of wife to husband; and—an exception to the general trend—the active role played by the saint, comparable to the position filled by the Anglo-Saxon abbesses.

The historical evidence, by and large, indicates a definitely subordinate position for women. Throughout the Anglo-Saxon period, the activities of women tended to be limited to the domestic sphere. Only at the very highest level of society, that is, among royal ladies, was there any significant exception to this. Royal women played a distinct formal role in the secular affairs of Anglo-Saxon society, and, in the early period, regularly took an active part in the affairs of the Church, as the abbesses of the double monasteries. But, in the main, the position accorded to women was restricted and passive, though not degraded or oppressed.

In poetry, as in the historical sources, the relationship of woman to man is presented as paralleling that of thane to lord. This is especially apparent in The Wife's Lament. The minor significance attached to
the husband-wife relationship is reflected in the fact that there is no vocabulary exclusively designating it, and that it has to be described in the terminology of male employment. This state of affairs is illustrated by some of the Anglo-Saxon legal documents, as well as by the poetry.

Accordingly, the place of women in Old English poetry is small. The Germanic strain has only one role earmarked for female characters: that of graceful accessories to the communal life of warriors in the hall. This role is well enough established, but so limited that the figures who occupy it are mostly dismissed in a phrase or a few sentences. The Christian strain introduces one prominent part for female characters: that of the saint or holy woman. This is the only role in which women can take a major place in the action of Old English poetry.

It is interesting that the Anglo-Saxon poets have failed to exploit the occasional historical instances of women in positions of vigorous leadership in the secular world. The poets seem to have found no significant reflection of the human condition in these exceptional cases. Because poetry aims at universality, the Anglo-Saxon poets have found their telling themes in the recurrent, and not—as far as we can tell from the extant remains—the exceptional. The qualities and situations which must have marked the career of Æthelflæd do not become the stuff of Old English poetry.

However, the very fact that the function of women
in the poetry is limited can be an asset. Those characters in Old English poetry which are the most skilfully drawn are the ones which move farthest away from the rigid lines of the traditional stereotypes. The areas of experience to which the stereotypes correspond are mostly public and corporate. Thus, the feelings experienced by one individual in his relationship to another, apart from the larger social relationship in which they might be contained, are scarcely treated by the poets. Domestic relationships are rarely the subject of Old English poetry. Hence, when the poets wish to treat these uncharted areas of experience, they are forced back upon observation, rather than literary precedent. It is in the region of personal, rather than public, experience that female characters come into their own, for, with the exception of the 'saint's life' genre, the poetry allows them no active part in the public arena with which it deals. The only distinct role allotted to women by the native tradition is a passive one: that of the beautiful woman in the hall, who symbolises the warrior's more peaceful pleasures.

Paradoxically, the female characters who are restricted to a passive role are the ones that appear the most vigorous and lifelike in the poetry. The type of the female saint provides a character-part of leadership and action; but the figures who occupy this part are lacking in vitality. Not only are the lines of the stereotype rigid; they fail to conform to the fears and struggles of
real life. Thus, there is only a superficial correspondence between the poetic saints and the actual abbesses of Anglo-Saxon England. In contrast, a greater potential exists in the situation of the other women characters of the poetry. There is a natural poignancy in the situation of a person who thinks, feels, and struggles, but whose urge to action is frustrated. Such is the condition of many women characters in the poetry. Poets dealing with female characters actually have more scope for a study of psychological motivation, simply because these characters do not traditionally express themselves in public action. The treatment of female figures encouraged the poets to depart from the public sphere, and enter a realm of private experience more conducive to the portrayal of intimate thoughts and feelings, and to the introduction of naturalistic detail. Moreover, the fact that women were typically barred from action would lend a particular urgency to their hopes and desires.

Thus, it is no coincidence that female characters are often especially eloquent and persuasive. We see this in Wealhtheow's highly charged speech expressing her hope that Hrothulf will be good to her sons. We see it too in Hildegund's encouragement of her lover in Waldere, although in the fragment as we have it there is no indication that she speaks from a position of enforced passivity. In Christ I and Genesis B, Mary and Eve, respectively, speak with similar persuasive eloquence, which gains its peculiar
resonance from our awareness of the strength of the speaker's personality in contrast with her physical weakness and dependence on her husband. In *The Wife's Lament* and *Wulf and Eadwacer*, the speaker's eloquence is of a somewhat different kind, since it demands no response from particular persons. But there is a special tension created by the conflict between a struggling will and the situation of inaction forcibly imposed upon it.

Again, the narrow focus used by the poets in dwelling on female figures gives an unusual sharpness of delineation. This can be seen in the intimate exchanges between Mary and Joseph in *Christ I*, and Adam and Eve in *Genesis B*. Here the dialogue—whether quoted or described—and the interactions accompanying it are presented with striking vividness and accuracy. *The Wife's Lament* and *Wulf and Eadwacer* are less realistic, but show the same technique of close-up, resulting in a finely-drawn portrait of feeling. Altogether, the passivity and confinement associated with women lends itself to a penetrating study of mood and reaction extremely unusual in Old English.

Thus, the treatment of women in Old English poetry does indeed reflect the social norms of Anglo-Saxon England, particularly the earlier period, and it is this reflection which provides the key to the greater originality to be found in association with female, rather than male, characters. Female characters offer an opportunity for an
exploration of individual feeling exceptional in Old English poetry. The opportunity arises because women characters are less provided for in the stereotyped traditions of the poetry than their male counterparts, because the passivity associated with the situation of women lends itself to a more interiorised study of thought and feeling, and because the arena in which women play a part is extremely circumscribed, demanding a close-up study of personal interaction.

However, as we saw in Chapter I, the social position of women in Anglo-Saxon England was not static, but improved noticeably in the course of the period, although their status at all times remained, in most cases, a definitely subordinate and dependent one. Is this improvement reflected in the poetry? The previous chapters follow a progression in the treatment of women characters, from a flat presentation that fails to go beyond the rigid outlines of the established roles, to a portrayal that shows a considerable amount of realism. On the one hand we have the cursorily type-cast women of the Riddles and Maxims, and on the other the sensitive perception of Wulf and Eadwacer and The Wife's Lament and the vivid naturalism of the intimate scenes in Christ I and Genesis B. The poems in the 'saint's life' genre, remain flat and rigid in their handling of character; although they contain a much more extended treatment of women than the Riddles and Maxims, their presentation is not more convincing or
perceptive. In the 'saint's life' poems, the power of the convention is too strong for any of the characters to escape from it. The genre issues, fully fledged, from its Latin origins, and no further growth takes place in Old English poetry. Thus, we must look elsewhere for a development in the direction of individuality.

In the other poems, there is actually a chronological development in the presentation of women characters, reflecting a change in societal attitudes, from the view of women as objects in the earliest Anglo-Saxon period to a certain recognition of their status as independent human beings. However, none of the poems which illustrate this development belongs to the latest period—the tenth and eleventh centuries, when the historical sources show the most liberal attitude towards women. In fact, little Old English poetry dates from this late period, probably because of the social upheavals of the times.

If we leave out the 'saint's life' genre, we find that the development traced in Chapters III to VI is directly related to the chronology of the material involved. Those poems in which women characters are regarded primarily in terms of the social function which they fulfil are earlier than the poems which show an interest in women as individuals, aside from their social role. The Riddles, the Maxims, and Beowulf are all poems which draw heavily upon the social stereotype in their presentation
of female characters. Further, they are all poems originating fairly early in the Anglo-Saxon period.\(^2\) Beowulf is generally dated not long after 700.\(^3\) Although the Riddles are of different dates, the collection was most likely originally formed under the influence of the collections of Latin riddles composed in the late seventh and early eighth centuries. The Maxims are highly traditional, and the kind of proverbial wisdom they contain is very early, although the present arrangement may have been made later in the Anglo-Saxon period.\(^4\) The treatment of character in all these poems evidently represents an earlier stratum than that found in the works which show a more penetrating study of women figures. The change is not perfectly clear-cut, partly because of the problem of multiple authorship,\(^5\) and partly because one of the earlier poems, Beowulf, is also one of the most sophisticated. Nevertheless, it is significant that the Beowulf poet did not individualise his characters, and that his more subtle study of female figures involved a special use of the stereotype rather than a departure from it. As for the remaining poems, The Wife's Lament and Wulf and Eadwacer stem from the middle period of Old English poetic composition, the eighth to the ninth century, the latter poem perhaps being later than the former.\(^6\) Genesis B and Christ I, probably dated close to 900, are a little later still.\(^7\) These are the poems in which the most individualistic and naturalistic treatment of character is
The innovations to be found in the presentation of female characters in Old English poetry are thus intimately bound up with the social realities of the period. The evidence shows that the earliest stratum of poetry reflects the social outlook of the early Anglo-Saxon period, i.e., that embodied in the Laws of Ethelbert, and that the more individualised treatment of female figures in the subsequent poetry is connected with an alteration in the outlook of society as a whole. This development in both is undoubtedly to be attributed to a civilising movement and the growth of a more humane awareness. The poets' realisation of the possibilities of characterisation inherent in passive female figures is the product of a change in mentality and an increased interest in persons as individuals rather than representatives of a particular social stereotype.

The change can be traced in the development from the proverbial poetry, ancient in origin, to Christ I and Genesis B, which date from the later part of the Anglo-Saxon era. In the Riddles and Maxims, women are scarcely regarded as people at all. The Beowulf poet takes up this traditional presentation of them, but, with great sensitivity, uses it for his own strategic purposes, showing how his three 'peaceweaving' queens are mere pawns in the power struggles of men. The 'saints' poems,' crippled as far as characterisation goes by the demands of their genre, lie outside this development. However, we see
a further progress in the presentation of the female speakers in *The Wife's Lament* and *Wulf and Eadwacer*. Here, the traditional exile figure is treated in a new way, and women subjects are used to explore intimate feelings not normally dealt with in the poetry. Finally, in *Christ I* and *Genesis B*, we see two women characters as the pivotal figures in dramatic scenes presenting a sharply realistic interaction between individuals. The intimacy and realism found here are unique in extant Old English poetry.

The development of interest in character, in which female figures play a crucial part, is the literary expression of an increasing humanism in the Anglo-Saxon era. It is not an isolated trend, but part of a more widespread tendency, as can be seen if we compare the characterisation in the Old English poems to that in contemporary, or near-contemporary, literature. Indeed, the phenomena to be found in association with the female characters of Old English poetry actually foreshadow later movements, in English and continental literature, and suggest that the culture of the Anglo-Saxons contained within itself the seeds of those literary developments which apparently were imported from the continent after the Conquest.

The affinities traced between Old English and other medieval literatures do not lie mainly with other literatures in the Germanic tradition. Thus, although Old English poems have genre affinities with the gnomic and
heroic poems of the Icelandic Edda, the presentation of character in the latter works is markedly different. The literature of medieval Iceland originates in an environment in some ways rougher and more primitive, in other ways freer and more advanced than Anglo-Saxon England. Whereas the presentation of women in Old English poetry in the native tradition invariably treats women as passive figures, the treatment of women in the Edda is quite the reverse: they are active and formidable.

The same is true of the later Icelandic literature. The women in the family sagas, though they do not actually fight, are very capable of changing the course of events. Rather than being the victims of male intrigue, as in the Old English poems, they are themselves the instigators of feud and violence, and men become the victims of their fierce jealousy and passion. Thus, Hallgerth in Njal's Saga, remembering the slap that her husband once gave her, refuses to come to his aid by giving him a strand of her hair for his bowstring. Because of this, he is overwhelmed by his enemies and killed. Guthrun of Laxdaela Saga is a tragic figure. Four times married, but never to Kjartan, whom she loved, and killed out of jealousy, when asked at the end of her life which man she loved best, Guthrun replies, "I was worst to the one I loved the most." In fact, the women of the sagas are much more highly developed as characters than the women of Old English literature, and are often most impressive and memorable.
figures. But the techniques of characterisation to be found in them are quite different from the tendencies present in Old English verse.

The effective handling of women characters in Old English poetry is to be linked, not with the Old Icelandic material, but with the developments to be observed in more southerly Europe. As was shown earlier, the 'saint's poem,' the lyric, and the 'dramatic' poetry of Old English have their counterparts in medieval literature more generally, first in Latin, and later in the various vernacular languages of the continent.

The *vita* and the homily, because of their strongly didactic aims, are not genres in which much individualisation of character takes place. This is even more true of the Old English poems than of their Latin and Middle English counterparts. In its heavily moralising tendency, and in its sensationalism, the saint's life also resembles certain kinds of romance, which, likewise, are unconvincing in their portrayal of character. However, there are varieties of romance in which the presentation of character is far more subtle. The Old English love lyrics and the 'dramatic' passages in *Christ I* and *Genesis B* have something in common with such romances, as well as with the lyric and the drama, respectively.

In Chapter V, *The Wife's Lament* and *Wulf and Eadwacer* were compared with 'women's songs' in other literatures of medieval Europe, but it was found that the Old English love
poems had in some ways a deeper affinity with later medieval works, specifically, with the courtly lays of Marie de France. In this respect, the Old English love poems can be related to the whole later tradition of courtly love, which finds its most impressive expression not in the shorter and more lyrical lay, but in the longer narrative poem, i.e., the romance. The literature of courtly love reflects the same humanising movement which is reflected in the Old English poets' interest in women characters. This development is manifested, in the 'courtly' literature, in an idealised treatment of women characters and of sexual love, and in a correspondingly high value attached to delicacy of sensibility. The combination of these factors leads to the same kind of exploration of intimate feelings which we saw in the Old English love poems and the 'dramatic' passages from *Christ I* and *Genesis B*. Although the Old English works are in no sense 'courtly,' they show a new exploration of psychology rather like that to be found in the best of the courtly romances for instance, in those of Chrétien de Troyes.

One of the most striking features of Chrétien's romances is the internal debate that goes on in the minds of the characters. In *Erec*, Enid is repeatedly torn between her fear of breaking her husband's command of silence and her fear for his life, which she is compelled to save by uttering a warning. In *Yvain*, the hero,
smitten by Laudine's beauty, is tormented by the moral complexities of a situation in which he finds himself in love with a woman whose husband he has just killed. Chrétien loves to dwell upon these moments of mental conflict. Although they present the situations much more briefly and simply, the authors of the above-mentioned Old English poems, especially the poets of Christ I and Genesis B, also show an interest in these emotional tensions and conflicts.

The process seen at work in the characterisation of female figures in Old English poetry thus has broad cultural implications. It goes hand in hand with a civilising movement discernible in Anglo-Saxon society, and is linked with new growths in literature, which come to flower only later, on the continent and, subsequently, in post-Conquest England. The psychological insight present in the treatment of certain women characters in Old English poetry resembles that to be found later, in courtly lyric and romance, and even occasionally goes beyond it. The development in Old English poetry culminates in the simplicity and naturalism of the scenes between Adam and Eve in Genesis B, and between Joseph and Mary in Christ I. At moments—in Christ I and Genesis B—Old English poetry touches a kind of domestic realism which we associate, not with the elaborate ritual of the stylised lyrics and romances of courtly love, but with a much later literary development: the novel.
Footnotes

1 The latest poem discussed in this thesis is the tenth-century Judith, which, being one of the 'saint's life' group, lies outside the development traced in female characterisation.

2 Waldere, which I have grouped with the above poems, may be a little later (for the dating, see Chapter III, n. 18) and may have been rather freer in the handling of its heroine, but the poem's fragmentary nature makes it impossible to draw any firm conclusions.

3 See Chapter III, n. 1.

4 See Chapter III, n. 3.

5 An example is the sharpness of detail in the Frisian wife passage, which is unlike anything else in Maxims I. See Chapter III, n. 17.

6 See Chapter V, n. 2.

7 See Chapter VI, n. 3 (Genesis B), and n. 7 (Christ I).

8 Njal's Saga, trans. Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Palsson (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1960), p. 171. The saga is dated c. 1280. (See Introduction, p. 9.)

9 Laxdaela Saga, trans. Magnusson and Palsson (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1969), p. 238. The saga was written c. 1245. (See Introduction, p. 9.)


11 Ibid., pp. 198-99.
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The works in the following bibliography are divided into "literary" and "historical" sources, primary and secondary, translations being listed separately. Works of a hagiographic nature are in most, but not all, cases, included in the "literary" category. The works which are included in the "historical" category are those which have been used as references in Chapter I—on the historical position of Anglo-Saxon women.

Works in the first two sections of the bibliography (those containing primary sources in the original language) are sub-classified by subject, author, or title, as appropriate.

Primary Sources: Literary

Collected Editions


Individual Texts and Works by the Same Author

Ælfric


Ancren Riwle


Andreas


Apollonius


The Battle of Maldon


Beowulf


Bible

The Vulgate Bible

Christ


Christ and Satan

Cynewulf: Elene


Cynewulf: Juliana


Deor


Exodus


Felix


Genesis


Judith


Life of St. Cyriacus


Life of St. Juliana


Life of St. Katherine


Milton: Paradise Lost


The Seafarer


Virgil: Aeneid


Wakefield Mystery Plays


Waldere

Waltharius


The Wanderer


Widsith


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The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle


Bede


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