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

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

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

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

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

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

¹ All subsequent quotations from the poem are from Krapp and Dobbie 225-27.
The Old English “Husband’s Message” poem, or the rest of the fragment. The ensuing thirteen lines read:

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

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

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

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

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

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

nyde gebæded, nacan ut aþrong,
ond on yþa geong [ . . . . ] sceolde
faran on flotweg, forðsìpes georn,
mengan merestreamas. Nu se mon hafað
wean oferwunnen; nis him wilna gad,
ne meara ne maðma ne meododreama,
ænges ofer eorþ an eorlgestreona,
þeodnes dohtor, gif he þin beneah. (26-47)²

[Get on your way to seek the sea, the seagull’s domain;
Get on board a ship, so that you to the south from here
May find the man when the sea-track is over;
There your prince is waiting for you to arrive.
No greater desire can happen to him in the world
In his mind, according to what he said to me,
Than that the almighty God may grant you two
To be together and afterwards be able to

² My reading at this point shows slight departure from the punctuation as given in
The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records, and follows what was proposed by R. F. Leslie in
his Three Old English Elegies. The text in the former edition reads:

gif he þin beneah
ofe r eald gebeot in cer twega.
Gecyre ic ætsomne. . . (47b-49a)

R. F. Leslie provides a different punctuation to the lines:

gif hē þin beneah.
Ofer eald gebōt in cer twēga,
gehyre ic ætsomne. . .

In Leslie’s reading, there is a full stop after the word ‘beneah,’ and a new sentence
starts with ‘Ofer,’ whereas in The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records a period is put after
the word ‘twega.’ Also, the word ‘Gecyre’ in the former edition is being replaced
by ‘gehyre’—which, I think, makes more sense than ‘Gecyre.’
Distribute treasure, the studded bracelets,
To men and companions. He has enough
Of burnished gold, . . . .
Throughout the foreign people he holds domain,
Fair earth . . . .
Of devoted men, though here my friend. . . .
Compelled by necessity, pushed out a boat,
And on the expanses of waves alone had to
Voyage on the sea, and eager for departure,
Stir up the sea-currents. Now the man has
Overcome his woes; he does not lack desired things—
Horses, treasures, pleasures in the mead-hall,
Any of the noble treasures on earth,
A prince’s daughter—if he owns you.] (26-47; my translation)

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

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3 In Beowulf, the epithet ‘goldhroden,’ similar to ‘sinchroden’ in meaning and the formation of a single word by combining a noun and the participial suffix ‘-hroden,’ appears several times in referring to Wealhþeow (614, 640, etc.)
may become even stronger a commander of warriors, and eventually will act as a true ‘ring-giver’—the way Hrothgar was with Wealhtheow as his queen—to extend the metaphor of reunion with his wife to reunion with a retainer, with whom he used to pledge lifelong loyalty and mutual commitment. This is what the line (“a prince’s daughter— if he owns you”) implies in the guise of appealing to the addressee to fulfill the oath of conjugal fidelity. To repeat what I have said, the message is not directed literally to “a prince’s daughter,” as scholars have believed, but to a retainer that the thane in refuge, trying to have his former political power restored, wishes to join his newly-built military camp.

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

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

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

(48-53; my translation)

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

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

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

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

He punctuated in such a way that “þeodnes dohtor” is being treated as in the vocative case; accordingly, he read the message as an infallibly personal one from the refugee lord to his wife. No wonder scholars have unanimously shared the notion that the addressee in the fragment is a woman—the refugee lord’s wife—rather than a former retainer of his, who is left behind at his old homestead, and whom the lord ardently wishes to
make a journey over the waves for reunion. The old pledges and plights between the lord and his beloved retainer (the addressee) are repeatedly invoked for the sake of remembrance. The whole poetic fragment is an unidentified refugee thane’s message to his beloved retainer strongly tied to him by the oaths of comitatus.

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

Works Cited


ABSTRACT

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

Sung-Il Lee

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

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

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