



Radegund and Amalfrid in *The Wife's Lament*

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ABSTRACT

Who is the woman in *The Wife's Lament*? This essay makes her out to be St Radegund (c. 520–587), deaconess of Sainte-Croix in Poitiers. Reevaluating the narrative syntax mainly of the first half of this poem, the argument finds not the one man conventionally taken to be the woman's lover or husband in this poem, but four male subjects there whose actions fit the stories of Radegund's cousin Amalfrid, her husband Clothar, her unnamed but murdered brother, and lastly Lord Jesus. The poet's main sources are argued to be the two *Vitae* of St Radegund and the poems of Venantius Fortunatus (c. 530–c. 609), mostly his (and possibly also her) lament *De excidio Thoringiae* (c. 568). The essay finally claims that *The Wife's Lament* is related to the *winileodas* banned by Charlemagne in 789, and that it was composed in this period as an elegiac riddle for St Radegund.

‘Ic þis giedd wrece bi me ful geomorre, | minre sylfre sið’.¹ The woman speaking *The Wife's Lament* performs a love poem, apparently the earliest extant in English, which most scholars read as directed to one man. What if there is more than one man in the poem, however? This essay will argue that she speaks of four (a lover, her husband, her brother and Lord Jesus), three of whom she calls her *blaford*. Although it defies Ockham's razor, this claim of multiple meaning is in keeping with the playful indirection of other Old English poems. *The Wife's Lament* has once or twice been taken for a riddle.² The poem is found in the Exeter Book (Exeter Cathedral Library MS 3501), an anthology which goes well with enigma in that it contains approaching 100 acknowledged Riddles. The first sequence (of sixty

¹ ‘I perform this song about me in full melancholy, | a history of myself’, *The Wife's Lament*, lines 1–2. All translations the author's own unless otherwise specified. B. Mitchell and F.C. Robinson, *A Guide to Old English: Revised with Prose and Verse, Texts and Glossary*, 4th edn (Oxford, 1990), pp. 248–51. See also the editions in: *Three Old English Elegies*, ed. R. F. Leslie, 2nd edn (Exeter, 1988); *The Old English Elegies: a Critical Edition and Genre Study*, ed. A. L. Klinck (Montreal, 1992); *Eight Old English Poems*, ed. J. C. Pope and R. D. Fulk, 3rd edn (New York, 2000); P. S. Baker, *Introduction to Old English*, 2nd edn (Oxford, 2007); *The Longman Anthology of Old English, Old Icelandic and Anglo-Norman Literatures*, ed. and trans. R. North, J. Allard, with P. Gillies (Harlow, 2011), pp. 248–52; *Old English Shorter Poems, Vol. II: Wisdom and Lyric*, ed. and trans. R. E. Bjork (Cambridge, MA, 2014), pp. 104–107.

² F. Hicketier, ‘Klage der Fran, Botschaft des Gemabls und Ruine’, *Anglia* 11 (1889), 363–68; the opening, in K. Cherewatuk, ‘Radegund and the Epistolary Tradition’, in *Dear Sister: Medieval Women and the Epistolary Genre*, ed. K. Cherewatuk and U. Wiethaus (Philadelphia, 1993), pp. 20–45, at 36.

Riddles) leads directly into *The Wife's Lament*, while there is also a scattering of other *giedd* ('poems') that work in a similar way, such 'elegies' as *The Wanderer*, *Wulf and Eadwacer* and *The Ruin*. Like *The Wife's Lament*, these poems so stint on names and narrative detail that 'riddle' may be right for their mode no less than 'lyric', 'homily' or 'gnomic poem'.³ One of the most puzzling aspects of Old English literary criticism is the way in which so many scholars define the situation in this poem without seeking to identify it with a story. If this poem is a riddle, each one of its many puzzles begs for a solution without which the entire poem must remain a mystery. This essay, finding four men in *The Wife's Lament*, will look for an answer in St Radegund of Poitiers, as she appears in the prose accounts of her life, in the poems of Venantius Fortunatus, and above all in the first-person history of her love for Amalfrid in *De excidio Thoringiae* ('On the ruin of Thuringia').

NARRATIVE SYNTAX IN *THE WIFE'S LAMENT*

The story is of a woman who grows up, sees her lord sail to another land and then goes away herself. Both suffer a deception from the man's relatives which splits them up for ever. She ends up confined in a wilderness, living apart in a tumulus in which she passes the time remembering and weeping for her lost love. Speculating on her lover's or husband's fortunes, she imagines or hopes that he suffers in similar isolation and will likewise remember their time together in a happier place. The end hints at the need to start looking: 'Wa bið þam þe sceal | of langoþe leofes abidan'.⁴

The narrative part of this story is concentrated in the first half of *The Wife's Lament*.⁵ Underpinning the mystery here is a highly ambiguous syntax,⁶ in which the temporal adverbs and conjunctions, as aids to establishing a chronology, are particularly important. At first there is little difficulty. After the speaker has introduced her lifetime of suffering in lines 1–5, she gives her narrative an unambiguous start: *Ærest min blaford* ('First my lord') set off from his people over the sea (lines 6–7a). Temporal unities become trickier, however, around the word *ða* (line 9) in the passage that follows:

³ *Old English Elegies*, ed. Klinck, pp. 11–26, at 25. F. Walker-Pelkey, 'Frige hwæt ic batte: "The Wife's Lament" as Riddle', *Papers on Language and Literature* 28.3 (1992), 242–66. R. North, 'Metre and Meaning in *Wulf and Eadwacer*: Signý Reconsidered', in *Loyal Letters: Studies in Mediaeval Alliterative Poetry and Prose*, ed. L. A. J. Houwen and A. A. MacDonald (Groningen, 1994), pp. 29–54; 'Boethius and the Mercenary in *The Wanderer*', in *Pagan and Christian Themes in Medieval Germanic Literature: Proceedings of the Second Germania Latina Conference*, ed. L. A. J. Houwen and A. A. MacDonald, *Germania Latina* 2 (Groningen, 1995), 45–68.

⁴ 'Woe is him who shall from longing expect a beloved to arrive', lines 52b–53. See also Klinck, *Old English Elegies*, p. 188.

⁵ U. Böker, 'The Non-Narrative Structure of "The Wife's Lament": a Reconsideration of its Narrative Elements', in *Festschrift für Karl Schneider zum 70. Geburtstag am 18. April 1982*, ed. E. S. Dick and K. R. Jankowsky (Amsterdam, 1982), pp. 417–29, at 419.

⁶ Klinck, *Old English Elegies*, pp. 49–54, at 52.

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hæfde ic uhtceare
hwær min leodfruma londes wære,
ða ic me feran gewat folgað secan
wineleas wræcca for minre weaþearfe.
Ongunnon þæt þæs monnes magas hycgan
þurh dyrne geþoht þæt hy toðalden unc,
þæt wit gewidost in woruldrice
lifdon laðlicost, ond mec longade.⁷ (lines 7b–14)

This reading, with *ða* as a conjunction, privileges feeling over action in the woman's voice, lyric over epic. If action over feeling is preferred, instead, the conjunction *ða* on line 9a must be read as *Ða* for 'Then' at the head of a main clause, announcing the speaker's own journey.⁸ Curry also reads a *Ða* for 'Then', but takes this to be synchronous with the lord's *Ærest* on line 6a,⁹ so that the woman leaves with him. Hereby, in either case, a sentence-initial *Ongunnon* is required on line 11a, which puts the plotting of the lord's kinsmen third in the order of events: first the lord leaves, then the woman, then his kinsmen plot. Alternatively, a sentence-initial *Ða* on line 9a could be read as 'When' at the head of a clause which was subordinate to an ensuing main clause beginning with *ongunnon* in lines 11–14. This reading, which sidelines the woman's journey by making the deception the next real incident after the lord's departure, has proved popular with male editors.¹⁰ The option followed here, as above, accords with the poem's lyrical elements, reading *ða* on line 9a as a retrospective 'when' or 'whereupon',¹¹ whereby the action of the woman's leaving is subordinated to her anxiety in lines 7b–8.

The general upshot, that the lord leaves, the woman leaves, and the lord's kin then plot to keep them apart, poses the poem's first major problem of chronology, for the woman, if it is she rather than the man who is misdirected, is better told the wrong address before departure. A pluperfect meaning for *ongunnon* ... *hycgan* ('had begun to plot'), as well as for *bet* and *funde* on lines 15 and 18, would make the

⁷ 'I had care before dawn about which land my prince might be in, **when** I set off on my journey to seek a household, a friendless exile, in my woeful need. The kinsmen of that man began to plot with hidden intent to split us from each other, so that most widely in this worldly kingdom we have lived most hatefully apart, while I was in longing'. Emphasis added by author.

⁸ Klinck, *Old English Elegies*, p. 93. B. Mitchell, *Old English Syntax*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1985) I, 251 (§642).

⁹ J. L. Curry, 'Approaches to a Translation of the Anglo-Saxon *The Wife's Lament*', *MÆ* 35.3 (1966), 187–98, at 190.

¹⁰ *Three Old English Elegies*, ed. Leslie, p. 47; *A Choice of Anglo-Saxon Verse*, ed. and trans. R. Hamer (London, 1970), p. 73; Mitchell and Robinson, *Guide to Old English*, p. 249; Baker, *Introduction*, p. 246. The *ða* conjunction is omitted in favour of parataxis in *The Complete Old English Poems*, trans. C. Williamson, with an introduction by T. A. Shippey (Philadelphia, 2017), p. 552.

¹¹ Böker, 'Non-Narrative Structure of "The Wife's Lament"', p. 422.

plotting and other actions precede the woman's journey, but Mitchell doubts that *ða* can command a pluperfect tense in a preterite verb.¹² So two things may be deduced from this sequence so far. One is that the woman seeks a *folgað* ('household/retinue/service', line 9b) other than that of her lord. The other is that the kinsmen's plot against her succeeds because they accompany their lord to a place where, once arrived, they keep each party in ignorance of the other's whereabouts.

Inexplicably in line 15, *blaford min* ('my lord'), despite not knowing where she is, tells the woman where to live. The passage in which she responds to this new abode contains another problematic *ða*:

Ahte ic leofra lyt on þissum londstede,
holdra freonda; forþon is min hyge geomor,
ða ic me ful gemæcne monnan funde,
heardsæligne, hygegeomorne,
mod miþendne, morþor hycgend<n>e
bliþe gebæro.¹³ (lines 16–21a)

The question here is whether *ða* on line 18a is taken to be 'Then' at the head of a main clause,¹⁴ 'when' after a main clause,¹⁵ or 'when' before a main clause.¹⁶ At any rate, the words *me ful gemæcne* (line 18a, where *gemæc* is the etymon of ME *make* ('spouse'), imply that this man is the woman's future husband. Thus the above passage may be a reminiscence, for she has already referred to *min blaford* (line 6) and to *blaford min* (line 15), with terms which may be used for a husband. In this case, the conjunction *ða* on line 18a might be read as *Ða* ("Then") as with Leslie, Hamer and Mitchell and Robinson above (or even better, 'By then'), so that by the time the woman felt sad in her lonesome new abode, she had met the 'lord' or husband whom she now wishes to describe to us. However, as we have just seen with Mitchell, the conjunction *ða* cannot bring a pluperfect and is better taken as eliciting a preterite indicative, synchronous with, or later than, the action in the sentence just before (OE *funde* may be treated as indicative

¹² Mitchell, *Old English Syntax*, I, 267 (§§643–43), II, 310 (§2564). See also Klinck, *Old English Elegies*, p. 50.

¹³ 'I had few dear to me in this rural homestead, few loyal friends; and so my mind is sad, **when** I found a man for me fully suitable, one of cruel destiny, serious in purpose, concealing his mind, plotting a murder with cheerful demeanour'. Emphasis added by author.

¹⁴ *Three Old English Elegies*, ed. Leslie, p. 47. *Choice of Anglo-Saxon Verse*, trans. Hamer, p. 73. Mitchell and Robinson, *Guide to Old English*, p. 250.

¹⁵ Böker, 'Non-Narrative Structure of "The Wife's Lament"', p. 422. Klinck, *Old English Elegies*, p. 93.

¹⁶ Curry, 'Approaches to a Translation of *The Wife's Lament*', p. 491. Baker, *Introduction*, p. 247. The *ða* conjunction is again omitted, in *Complete Old English Poems*, trans. Williamson, p. 552.

preterite of *findan* here).¹⁷ Consequently, whether it is 'when' or 'Then' that we read into *ða* in the middle of the above passage, the given spouse appears to be other than the departing *blaford* on line 6, who must be 'lord' to the woman in a non-marital way.

Klinck's reading of *ða* as a retrospective 'when' is preferable. By subordinating the encounter with a future husband to *forþon is min hyge geomor*, the woman's earlier main clause on present melancholy, Klinck foregrounds emotion in a way which accords with lyric. Moreover, the present tense of this clause, flanked as it is by the preterites *Abte* and *funde*, points to the arrival of *me ful gemæcne monnan* on line 18 as the moment when the woman's loneliness might be redressed. As Leslie notes, the *forþon* conjunction roots the woman's sadness in her lack of friends.¹⁸ This half-line, therefore, in which the woman declares herself sad, seems to balance two possibilities of contact, until we see betrayal in the husband who should be there to realise one of them.

The husband's qualities deteriorate as lines 17–20 unfold, even while the half-line *bliþe gebæro* (line 21a) returns us remarkably to the woman's initially positive impression. Perhaps because of its optimism, this cheerful half-line is often detached from the earlier rake's progress and read as the beginning of a new clause which continues with the woman's assertion that *ful oft wit beotedan* ('full often did we two vow') that nothing but death would ever divide them.¹⁹ The half-line *bliþe gebæro* has been seen to work in both directions,²⁰ but not all metrists accept the existence of *apo koinou* constructions in Old English verse,²¹ and it seems better to read it as a *hakenstil* finale to the foregoing list of attributes.²² If the formula *bliþe gebæro* looks back rather than forwards, it gives the new husband a debonnaire style which deceives his wife about the cruelty of his character and especially about his forthcoming role in a *morþor*.

The latter word, contextually the biggest puzzle of all, means 'murder' in line with its modern English reflex, rather than 'crime' or 'hidden deed', albeit these

¹⁷ On *funde* as indicative, see Mitchell, *Old English Syntax*, II, 310 (§2564).

¹⁸ *Three Old English Elegies*, ed. Leslie, p. 54.

¹⁹ S. B. Greenfield, 'The Wife's Lament Reconsidered', *PMLA* 68.4 (1953), 907–12, at 909–910. *Eight Old English Poems*, ed. Pope and Fulk. Baker, *Introduction*, p. 247.

²⁰ K. Malone, 'Two English *Frauenlieder*', in *Studies in Old English Literature in Honor of Arthur G. Brodeur*, ed. S. B. Greenfield (Eugene, 1963), pp. 106–117, at 107.

²¹ Against such constructions in Old English verse are E. G. Stanley, 'ἄπὸ κοινοῦ, chiefly in *Beowulf*', in *Anglo-Saxonica: Festschrift für Hans Schabram zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. K. R. Grinda and C.-D. Wetzel (Munich, 1993), pp. 181–207; and R. D. Fulk, 'On Argumentation in Old English Philology', *ASE* 32 (2003), 1–26.

²² *Three Old English Elegies*, ed. Leslie, p. 47; *Choice of Anglo-Saxon Verse*, trans. Hamer, p. 72. Mitchell and Robinson, *Guide to Old English*, p. 250. Klinck, *Old English Elegies*, p. 93. *Complete Old English Poems*, trans. Williamson, p. 552. M. Osborn, 'Rereading *The Wife's Lament* with Dido of Carthage: the Husband and the *Herbeard*', *Humanities* 11.69 (2022), 1–32, at 5.

serve much the same end.²³ Insofar as the woman's future husband is not all he seems when she meets him, *morþor* marks a disturbing intrusion of narrative. Most commentators elide him with the *blaford* on line 6, making the murder trigger his trip into exile. However, as we have seen, the lord who first departed appears to be a different man. Whether or not this opening lord is one with the *blaford min* who tells the woman where to live in line 15, the *ða*-conjunction announces a newcomer on line 18a. To read him and his deed into the initial *min blaford* on line 6 would also run counter to *Ærest*, which claims the exile as the first thing that happens. Thus there appear to be at least two men so far in this poem.

In lines 21b–26, the woman remembers a time which appears to follow on from her first meeting with the husband. In these lines she says that *wit* ('we two') vowed a lifelong love or friendship which *is nu <formumen> swa hit no wære* ('is now <taken out> as if it had never been', line 24).²⁴ Before a variant, in lines 27–8, of the lord's instruction on where to live in line 15, the woman appears to tie up this story of a husband and the vows of love or friendship with a reflection that 's<c>eal ic feor ge neah | mines felaleofan fæhðu dreogan'.²⁵ The legal word *fæhðu* has been examined with great thoroughness by John D. Niles, who defines its meaning as (1) 'an act of violence', (2) 'the threat of vengeance that is kindled by a criminal act', and (3) 'a general state of hostility or enmity'.²⁶ Niles' view of the poem, as a one-man story without heroic violence which is told by a woman forsaken, leads him to exclude any intergroup feuding in *The Wife's Lament*. He splits *mines felaleofan* off from *fæhðu*, grouping the phrase with *feor ge neah* on the preceding b-line, so as to translate lines 25b–26 as 'Whether far or near from my beloved, I must suffer enmity'.²⁷ Although this reading overlooks the word *morþor* on line 20, which does point to an act of violence, Niles' 'enmity' may be treated as apposite if we take it to refer to a state of hostility, based on violence, in line with his third definition above. In this case, 'feud' may still be viable for *fæhðu* as the description of an intergroup resentment. Moreover, if the murder and feud are related, as joint cause of the woman's own exile, it seems unlikely that the term *mines felaleofan* refers to the husband. How can this man remain the woman's beloved if his act of violence brings their love to nothing? Again, there appear to be at least two men in this story.

²³ Klinck, *Old English Elegies*, p. 182.

²⁴ Reading after *Three Old English Elegies*, ed. Leslie, p. 47 (**formumen* lost by haplography). For a reading in which *wit* here divides wife from husband, see A. W. Clark, 'As Though "Wit" Never Were: the Dual Pronoun as Interpretive Crux in *The Wife's Lament*', *JEGP* 121.3 (2022), 321–41.

²⁵ 'Far and near must I endure the feud of my dearly beloved', lines 25b–26.

²⁶ J. D. Niles, 'The Myth of the Feud in Anglo-Saxon England', *JEGP* 114.2 (2015), 163–200, at 178.

²⁷ Niles, 'Myth of the Feud', p. 196.

The poem at this half-way point enters a lyrical phase, moving from the preterite to mostly the present tense in order to reflect on the woman's immediate plight.²⁸ Some readers treat the narrative of the first half as inscrutable and read the poem for its expressions of emotion, as a *planctus*.²⁹ Others psychoanalyse the speaker,³⁰ or treat her as a mound-spirit³¹ or valkyrie³² or as a dead woman giving prophecy from beyond the grave.³³ With all this variety it must be agreed that the temporal unities of the first half of *The Wife's Lament* are not self-evident. While the conjunctions there tell us that the narrative has one woman and at least two men, it is not clear that the *blaford* on line 6 is one with the *blaford* on line 15, or either of them with the marital *monnan* on line 18, who is himself unlikely to be identical with the *felaleofan* on line 26. Nonetheless, the emotions will have been based on incident. So much depends on knowing which man does what in this woman's story in the poem's first half, in order to understand why she is unhappy in the second, that the muddle begs a question. Either *The Wife's Lament* is poorly written, or it is a riddle for a source that the poet expects readers or audience to know.

RADEGUND AND AMALFRID IN *THE WIFE'S LAMENT*

So far, we have seen that the poem refers to at least two men, one of whom is the speaker's lover and the other her husband. If we follow the chronology of the opening narrative, the lover goes into exile, then the woman, although to a different place, whereupon the woman falls out of touch through the plotting

²⁸ Böker, 'Non-Narrative Structure of "The Wife's Lament"', pp. 420–21.

²⁹ P. Whittier, 'Syntax and Poetry in Four Old English Elegies' (unpubl. PhD dissertation, Univ. of Oregon, 1968), p. 67. U. Schaefer, 'Two Women in Need of a Friend: a Comparison of *The Wife's Lament* and Eangyth's letter to Boniface', in *Germanic Dialects: Linguistic and Philological Investigations*, ed. B. Brogyanyi and T. Krömmelbein (Amsterdam, 1986), pp. 491–524, at 492. P. A. Belanoff, 'Women's Songs, Women's Language: *Wulf and Eadwacer* and *The Wife's Lament*', in *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature*, ed. H. Damico and A. Hennessey Olsen (Bloomington, 1990), pp. 193–203, at 197–200. H. Scheck, 'Seductive Voices: Rethinking Female Subjectivities in *The Wife's Lament* and *Wulf and Eadwacer*', *Lit. Compass* 5.2 (2008), 220–27, at 220–24. M. Muth, 'Delete as Appropriate: Writing between the Lines of Female Orality in *The Wife's Lament*', in *Women and Language: Essays in Gendered Communication Across Media*, ed. M. Ames and S. Himsel Burcon (Jefferson, 2011), pp. 61–74, at 68–72.

³⁰ For an especially searching analysis, F. J. Rozano-García, 'The Heart of Darkness: Descent, Landscape, and Mental Projection in *Christ and Satan* and *The Wife's Lament*', in *Darkness, Depression, and Descent in Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. R. Wehlauf (Berlin, 2019), pp. 277–98, at 289–93.

³¹ A. N. Doane, 'Heathen Form and Christian Function in *The Wife's Lament*', *MS* 28 (1966), 77–91.

³² W. Johnson, Jr., 'The Wife's Lament as Death-Song', in *The Old English Elegies: New Essays in Criticism and Research*, ed. M. Green (Rutherford, 1983), pp. 69–81.

³³ E. Lench, 'The Wife's Lament: a Poem of the Living Dead', *Comitatus* 1 (1970), 3–23. R. Luyster, 'The Wife's Lament in the Context of Scandinavian Myth and Ritual', *PQ* 77 (1998), 243–70. S. E. Deskins, 'Lyric Modes and Metaphor in *The Wife's Lament*', *ES* 101.4 (2020), 383–98, at 385–92.

of his relatives; living in a strange land, she marries a man who later carries out a murder; despite this betrayal and a related feud and her confinement in a dismal solitary place, the woman hopes that her lover will some day return to her.

This outline may be matched with the life of St Radegund (c. 520–87), founder of female monasticism in western Europe. As a child, Radegund grew up in the court of her uncle, King Hermanfrid of Thuringia, who had taken her into his household upon slaying Bertachar, his brother and her father, over the division of the kingdom.³⁴ For this success he owed a debt to King Theuderic of the Merovingians. There she fell in love with her young cousin Amalfrid, son of Hermanfrid. Some years later, in 531, Hermanfrid was killed when Theuderic overran Thuringia with his brother Chlothar and slaughtered what was left of its adult male aristocracy. The Franks failed, however, to catch Queen Amalberga, who had escaped with her son Amalfrid to Ravenna, city of her Ostrogothic family. In the ruined palace of Thuringia, Chlothar won Princess Radegund from his brother in a game of dice and carted her back to Gaul with her little brother, whose name does not survive (neither did he). Radegund he placed in a villa in Athies to be taught Christianity and the role of future wife. She joined Chlothar's other five wives when she married him in 540, at the age of nineteen. In the same year Count Belisarius completed his conquest of northern Italy for the Byzantine empire, captured Radegund's cousin Amalfrid in Ravenna, and led him and other Goths to the court of Emperor Justinian I (527–65) in Constantinople.³⁵ Chlothar's marriage to Radegund had given him a claim to Thuringia, but Radegund produced no heir with which to make good that claim. Now her brother looked likely to inherit. Before he could set off to join Amalfrid in the east, Chlothar had him murdered. Radegund fled her husband to St Medard, bishop of Noyon, who ordained her as a deaconess in his church. Ten years later in Poitiers, in 560, with an endowment from her now separated husband, she

³⁴ Radegund's life was celebrated in two *vitae*, one by Venantius Fortunatus and the other by Baudonivia, in *De Vita Sanctae Radegundis Libri Duo*, ed. B. Krusch, MGH, *Scriptores Rerum Merovingicarum* II, rev. edn (Hanover, 1951). There is also a summary of her life in *Gregorii Episcopi Turonensis Libri Historiarum X*, ed. B. Krusch and W. Levison, MGH, *Scriptores Rerum Merovingicarum* I.1, rev. edn (Hanover, 1951), 105 (III.7). For translations and discussion: *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages*, ed. and trans. J.-A. K. McNamara and J. E. Halborg, with E. Gordon Whatley (Durham, NC, 1992), pp. 59–63; Cherewatuk, 'Radegund and the Epistolary Tradition', pp. 20–27; *Venantius Fortunatus: Personal and Political Poems*, ed. and trans. J. George, *Trans. Texts for Historians* 23 (Liverpool, 1995), xix, 129–30; J.-A. K. McNamara, *Sisters in Arms: Catholic Nuns through Two Millennia* (Cambridge, MA, 1996), pp. 97–98; J. Glenn, 'Two Lives of Saint Radegund', in *The Middle Ages in Texts and Texture: Reflections on Medieval Sources*, ed. J. Glenn and T. N. Bisson (Toronto, 2011), pp. 57–70.

³⁵ W. Bulst, 'Radegundis an Amalfrid', in *Lateinisches Mittelalter: Gesammelte Beiträge*, ed. W. Berschin, *Supplemente zu den Sitzungsberichten der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philologisch-historische Klasse* 5 (Heidelberg, 1984), 44–56, at 46–48.

founded the nunnery later known as Sainte-Croix, the convent of the True Cross. There Radegund became patron of Venantius Fortunatus (c. 530–609), a native of northern Italy who arrived in Soissons in 566. In his shorter poems, Fortunatus sometimes writes to Radegund in the monastic cell to which she retreated during Lent, where she, like other nuns in theirs, would contemplate Lord Jesus in the form of a divine husband.

To some extent a relation between Radegund and *The Wife's Lament* has been recognised. A prose translation of a major poem in her voice, *De excidio Thoringiae*, was included as a general analogue to the Anglo-Saxon elegies in a collection of major Latin analogues some fifty years ago.³⁶ Hildegard Tristram suggests that 'the monologic form of the Insular "elegies" could be indebted to Fortunatus' verse epistles'.³⁷ Karen Cherewatuk even finds 'precise parallels' between *The Wife's Lament* and this Latin poem, although only to claim that *De excidio* is ultimately derived from a 'Germanic tradition' of women's oral poetry which is 'distinct from and mostly uninfluenced by Virgil or Ovid'.³⁸

The *De excidio* is a long lament on Radegund's life and lost kingdom of Thuringia. It was composed perhaps in 568, as one epistle among several by her confidant Venantius Fortunatus for a diplomatic mission to Emperor Justin II and Empress Sophia of Byzantium.³⁹ In the poem Radegund's persona addresses Amalfrid as a long-lost lover. Later, when she discovered that Amalfrid was long dead, Fortunatus composed a shorter epistle in her voice to his son or heir, *Ad Artachin* ('To Artachis').⁴⁰ By these and other stylised approaches Radegund achieved her aim, which was to secure a splinter of the cross and other relics for the eponymous convent she had founded in Poitiers and which she ruled as deaconess. As an ex-queen with a pacifying influence over Chlothar's sons by his other wives, Radegund raised not only her status in Francia but also that of Merovingian female monasticism.⁴¹ The *De excidio* gives a version of her life which

³⁶ M. J. B. Allen and D. G. Calder, *Sources and Analogues of Old English Poetry: the Major Latin Texts in Translation* (Cambridge, 1976), pp. 137–41.

³⁷ H. L. C. Tristram, 'The Early Insular Elegies: ITEM ALIA', in *Celtic Linguistics: Ieithyddiaeth Geltaidd: Readings in the Brythonic Languages: Festschrift for T. Arwyn Watkins*, ed. M. J. Ball, J. Fife, E. Poppe and J. Rowland (Amsterdam, 1990), pp. 343–62, at 349.

³⁸ Cherewatuk, 'Radegund and the Epistolary Tradition', p. 35. This idea is more fully represented in her 'Germanic Echoes in Latin Verse: the Voice of the Lamenting Woman in Radegund's Poetry', *Allegorica* 14 (1993), 3–21.

³⁹ Tristram, 'The Early Insular Elegies', p. 346. *Venantius Fortunatus*, ed. and trans. George, p. 116. B. Brennan, 'The Disputed Authorship of Fortunatus' Byzantine Poems', *Byzantion* 66.2 (1996), 335–45, at 341–44, against Cherewatuk's case for Radegund in 'Radegund and the Epistolary Tradition', pp. 38–42.

⁴⁰ *Venanti Honori Clementiani Fortunati Presbyteri Italici Opera Poetica*, ed. F. Leo, MGH, Auctores Antiquissimi IV.1 (Berlin, 1881), 278–79.

⁴¹ McNamara, *Sisters in Arms*, p. 98.

may be filled out by references to Radegund in the works of Bishop Gregory of Tours (538–94); by the two prose *Vitae*, one by Fortunatus and the other by the nun Baudonivia, which they wrote within two decades of her death; and by some poems which Fortunatus addressed to Radegund and Agnes, the convent's nominal abbess.

The first thirty of the *De excidio*'s 172 lines present an image of Thuringia as Troy, a corpse-strewn heap of ruins which is animated by the poet's contrasts between shattered timbers and earlier architectural glories and by images of family members slaughtered one in front of the other.⁴² Speaking as herself for the first time on line 36, Radegund's barbarian woman persona declares herself sole grief-stricken survivor, until on line 43 she turns to the beloved who got out in time, Amalfrid (line 48). On her own father's death at the hands of his, Radegund had been so comforted by her cousin that she could not bear to be parted from him for a moment. In lines 65–72 she remarks that he now lives on the other side of the world. From there she declares it a misery to live without him. A fantasy begins on line 85 in which she says that many a lord has been known to brave brigands across the Alps in icy weather to save his servant girl. She, however, must wait, ignorant of which city he is in, for a letter which will never arrive. From line 105, in a longer fantasy, she says that if the cloister did not hold her back, she would seek him herself, sailing, or even swimming, overseas to reach him, or even appearing as a ghost. Surely then he would weep at her burial. And why does her grief not erupt for her murdered brother? Radegund's lament for this beloved victim of an ambush (by Chlothar's men) and for her failure to give him burial rites fills thirty-three lines (125–56). Hereafter she begs Amalfrid for a letter, to give news of any kin of his still living and to commend her to the kings of the Franks, who honour her as a mother. Above all Radegund hopes for a letter.

There are ten parallels between *The Wife's Lament* and *De excidio*. If we take them in the order in which they arise in the English poem, we find the first pair when the woman introduces her theme in lines 1–5. She starts with her childhood, when she announces the many miseries she has to tell of, 'siþpan ic up <a>weox'.⁴³ In the *De excidio*, the speaker asks Amalfrid to remember how she was his own Radegund 'tuis primaevīs ... ab annis' and 'quantum me quondam dulcis dilexeris infans'.⁴⁴ The second parallel is when the woman states her position with 'A ic wite wonn minra wræcsiþa'.⁴⁵ Radegund makes herself historian of the invasion and its victims when she says that 'ut flerem cunctis una superstes ago'.⁴⁶

⁴² Plus ça change. *Venanti Fortunati Opera Poetica*, ed. Leo, pp. 271–78; my translation is based on that in *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages*, ed. and trans. McNamara and Halborg, pp. 60–105.

⁴³ 'Ever since I grew up', line 3.

⁴⁴ 'From your very first years', line 47; 'how much you, a sweet child, once loved me', line 49.

⁴⁵ 'Ever had I torment from my history of exile', line 5.

⁴⁶ 'I alone survive that I may weep for them all', line 36.

Third parallel is the sea-crossing at the beginning of the story in *The Wife's Lament*, with the woman saying that 'Ærest min hlaford gewat heonan of leodum | ofer yþa gelac'.⁴⁷ Revealing that the sea divides her and Amalfrid, Radegund imagines that 'prompta per undifragas transissem puppe procellas' to find him.⁴⁸ We also have the fact that Amalfrid, first in line to Hermanfrid's throne, was Radegund's *hlaford* and *leodfruma* as well (line 8a).

Fourth is after the departure of her lord, when the woman says: 'hæfde ic uhtceare | hwær min leodfruma londes wære' (lines 7b–8). Radegund wonders about her prince's whereabouts at greater length, also supplying suggestions:

quae loca te teneant, si sibilat aura, requiro,
nubila si volitant pendula, posco locum:
bellica Persidis seu te Byzantion optat
ductor Alexandriae seu regis urbis opes?
an Hierosolymae resides vicinus ab arce,
quo est genitus Christus virgine matre deus?⁴⁹ (lines 95–100)

Fifth, as we have seen, is where the woman makes her own journey to seek a household as an exile in woeful need (lines 9–10): this looks like the plight of ten-year-old Radegund when she was installed in one of King Chlothar's villas. In her own introduction, she says: 'missa sub hostili domino captiva potestas, | decidit in humili gloria celsa loco' (lines 9–10).⁵⁰ Radegund returns to this journey when she refers to Hermanfrid's slaying of her father, saying 'quae semel excessi patriam, bis capta remansi'.⁵¹

The sixth parallel concerns the enforced separation. As we have seen in *The Wife's Lament*, *þas monnes magas* did plot *þurb dyrne gebobt* (lines 11–12a) against each party finding the other. Referring, as we shall see, to the distance between them, Radegund begs Amalfrid to stay where he is, 'quo vota tenent meliora parentum'.⁵² Here it is worth noting that Amalfrid, now with the Ostrogothic family of his mother, Amalberga, had been out of touch with Radegund for thirty-seven years.

Seventh is when the lord's kinsmen succeed in their aim 'þæt hy todælden unc | þæt wit gewidost in woruldrice | lifdon laðlicost' (lines 12b–14). Concerning her

⁴⁷ 'First my lord set off from his people here across the play of waves', lines 6–7.

⁴⁸ 'Swift through wave-tossing gales would I cross by ship', line 107.

⁴⁹ 'If a breeze whispers, I enquire what places hold you, if low clouds drift by, I demand to know the place. Did warlike Persia or Byzantium choose you as leader or the wealth of King Alexander's city? Do you live in Jerusalem near the citadel where Christ the God was born of virgin mother?'

⁵⁰ 'Sent to a hostile lord, my power, made captive, fell from high glory into a humble place'.

⁵¹ 'Twice I have remained captive who left my homeland once', line 147.

⁵² 'Where prayers of kin hold better things', line 71.

separation from Amalfrid, shortly before she imputes it to his family's prayers (line 71; see the parallel above), Radegund goes into a greater order of magnitude:

vos quoque nunc Oriens et nos Occasus obumbrat,
me maris Oceani, te tenet unda rubri,
inter amatores totusque interiacet orbis:
hos dirimit mundus quos loca nulla prius.
quantum terra tenet tantum divisit amantem:
si plus arva forent, longius isses iter.⁵³ (lines 65–70)

Eighth is when, having settled in a strange country without friends, the woman feels sad at the failure of the marriage that might have redressed the balance, when she met *me ful gemæcne monnan* (line 18), whom, however, she later found to be 'morþor hycgend<n>e | bliþe gebæro' (lines 20b–21a). Here, with the speed of the woman's reflection on how ironically a vow came to fruition, it is possible to find the murdered man:

Ful oft wit beotedan
þæt unc ne gedælde nemne **deað ana**
owiht elles. Eft is þæt onhworfen,
is nu <fornumen> swa hit no wære,
freondscipe uncer. Scal ic feor ge neah
mines felaleofan fæhðu dreogan.⁵⁴ (lines 21b–26)

In this case, with the reversal coming straight after the husband's role in a murder, the woman's *felaleofa* would be her brother, third man in the poem so far. The brother's feud is for his role as her husband's last obstacle to Thuringia. He dies some way off from his sister, yet their enemy strikes close to her.

In *De excidio*, without naming her husband's hand in it, Radegund comes to *necce germani* ('my brother's killing', line 124), asking how he could have fallen so innocent into a wicked ambush. Hinting at Chlothar, the perpetrator, however, she asks how 'oppositaque fide raptus ab orbe fuit?'⁵⁵ Her guilt over not giving her brother his funeral rites extends to a feeling of responsibility for his death (through her lack of issue):

⁵³ 'Where you are now the sun rises, upon us it sets; Ocean Sea holds me, the waves of Red Sea you. And thrown between the lovers lies all the globe, a world divides those whom no space parted before. All that earth holds has split friend from the other: if regions were broader, you'd take a longer road'.

⁵⁴ 'Full often did we both vow that **only death** would part the two of us, nothing else. That is now turned back on itself, it is now <taken out> as if it had never been, our love each for the other. Far and near I must endure the feud of my dearly beloved'. Emphasis added by author.

⁵⁵ 'Was he robbed from the world by fealty opposed?', line 126.

Radegund and Amalfrid in The Wife's Lament

non licet extinctum vel meus ornet amor?
impia, crede, tuae rea sum, germane, saluti;
mors cui **sola** fui, nulla sepulchra dedi.⁵⁶ (lines 144-46)

Ninth, on absence, when the speaker of *The Wife's Lament* has described her underground dwelling and its wild surroundings, she declares that 'Ful oft mec her wraþe begeat | fromsiþ frean'.⁵⁷ Although the referent of *frea*n may not be so straightforward, this is reminiscent of Radegund's formal rebuke, when she asks of Amalfrid: 'an, quod in absenti te nec mea cura remordet?'⁵⁸

The tenth parallel with the *De excidio Thoringiae* starts when the speaker of *The Wife's Lament*, having mourned her absent king, having speculated on lovers in bed (or in their graves),⁵⁹ and having related daily routines in the midst of recalling anguished memories, advises that a young man should always keep his troubles to himself, beneath *blife gebæro* ('a cheerful demeanour', lines 42–45a, esp. 44a). What follows has been read either as concern,⁶⁰ or as a curse.⁶¹ Niles gives a summary of 'genteel' and 'vindictive' positions, before taking up the latter.⁶² The *De excidio*, however, may put the woman's reflection into a different category. After her gnomic reflection on the stiff upper lip, the woman says this:

Sy æt him sylfum gelong
eal his worulde wyn, sy ful wide fah
feorres folclondes þæt min freond siteð
under stanhlife storme behrimed,
wine werigmod wætre beflown
on dreorsele, dreogeð se min wine
micle modceare; he gemon to oft
wynlicran wic.⁶³ (lines 45b–52a)

⁵⁶ 'Might my love at least not adorn his mortal coil? Brother, believe me, I am guilty, uncaring of your safety; whose **death** I was **alone**, nor did I give you burial'. Emphasis added by author.

⁵⁷ 'Full often here it angrily got me, absence of a king', lines 32b–33a.

⁵⁸ 'Does care not gnaw you in my absence, as well as me in yours?', line 45.

⁵⁹ K. A. Lowe, "'A Fine and Private Place": *the Wife's Lament*, ll. 33–34, the Translators and the Critics', in *Lastworda Betst: Essays in Memory of Christine E. Fell, with her Unpublished Writings*, ed. C. Hough and K. A. Lowe (Donnington, 2002), pp. 122–43.

⁶⁰ Mitchell and Robinson, *Guide to Old English*, p. 264.

⁶¹ Greenfield, 'The Wife's Lament Reconsidered', p. 911. J. Chance, *Woman as Hero in Old English Literature* (Syracuse, 1986), p. 93.

⁶² J. D. Niles, 'The Problem of the Ending in *The Wife's Lament*', *Speculum* 78.4 (2003), 1107–1150, at 1115–16; 1140–44.

⁶³ 'Be it up to himself, all his joy in this world, be it outlawed at full distance in a province far away that my lover sits befrosted with the storm under a stone cliff, friend weary of mind, with water flooded over in a hall of blood, this friend of mine endures great care of heart; too often he remembers a more joyful place'.

The claim of a contrast between two conditions in *sy ... sy*, which may be read as ‘whether ... or’, has recently been disputed.⁶⁴ A contrast, however, may still be found in the man’s being contentedly settled in the first case and at the mercy of fate in the second. Mitchell advises a locative rather than abessive sense for the genitive case of *folclond* here.⁶⁵ This tells us that the woman’s lover, in his second state, is lost in some named province of the world. The scene’s other attributes mean more when compared with Radegund’s fantasy of Amalfrid en route to see her:

ut redimat dominus vernam, saepe ipse per Alpes
frigore concretas cum nive rumpit aquas;
intrat in excisis umbrantia rupibus antra,
ferventem affectum nulla pruina vetat,
et duce cum nullo, pede nudo, currit amator
atque suos praedae hoste vetante rapit.
adversas acies et per sua vulnera transit,
quod cupit ut capiat nec sibi parcit amor.⁶⁶ (lines 85–92)

Read in this light, *The Wife’s Lament* continues with the woman’s fantasy of her lover either staying where he is or trying to find her. The storm, cliff and frost accord with the Alpine ice of Radegund’s description. The *dreorsele* (line 50a), if not a ‘ship’ as in Wentersdorf’s reading of a voyage here,⁶⁷ may be read as a ‘hall of blood’ in keeping with the *vulnera* (line 91) of Radegund’s *dominus* (line 85), insofar as *se min wine* may have fought his way through enemies in his (here apparently fruitless) effort to reach her. In lines 52b–53, as we have seen, the speaker appears to end by suggesting that one lover should look for the other rather than wait for him or her to arrive.

RADEGUND AS SPONSA CHRISTI IN THE WIFE’S LAMENT

The poem’s location, first on line 15 and again in lines 27–41, points to the inclusion of a fourth male persona, whose love outdoes that of all rivals. St Radegund’s monastic life tells us that the earth-cave is where the woman loves Lord Jesus.

⁶⁴ Deskis, ‘Lyric Modes and Metaphor’, p. 385. Clark, ‘As Though “Wit” Never Were’, pp. 337–41.

⁶⁵ Mitchell, *Old English Syntax*, II, 585–86 (§1399).

⁶⁶ ‘A lord, to save his homebred servant girl, often in the Alps breaks freeze-cemented waters in a blizzard; he enters a cave of shadows in the broken cliffs, no frost there may forbid his burning passion; barefoot, with none to guide him, the lover runs, snatches his share of booty from a forbidding foe, crosses enemy blades in spite of his wounds, to take what he desires, for love spares not itself.’

⁶⁷ K. Wentersdorf, ‘The Situation of the Narrator in the Old English *Wife’s Lament*’, *Speculum* 56.3 (1981), 492–516, at 509–10.

First there is what appears to be an old heathen shrine: 'Het mec hlaforð min herheard niman' (line 15). The scribe wrote *her heard niman*, which Klinck follows in order to translate 'My lord commanded, cruel, to seize me here'.⁶⁸ Although this separation of elements dramatises the narrative, the half-line becomes metrically irregular, while OE *eard niman* for 'to take up abode' is well enough attested (as in *Psalms* 131, 15.3; *Christ*, line 63; *Guthlac B*, line 1372) to define *heard* as a miscopying of *eard*. Leslie thus emends to *eard*,⁶⁹ in order to read *her* ('here', i.e. 'in this country'), so placing the wife in a homeland to which her lord has sent her.

A third reading, nonetheless, puts the b-line's first stress more suitably on a noun than on the adverb *her*, by running the words together as *herb-eard* ('grove'), a compound with *herb-* for *bearg* ('(heathen) shrine').⁷⁰ This reading gives 'My lord bid me take up a temple abode' for the line. Although a *herb*-spelling for *bearg* is elsewhere unattested, it can be treated as a case of Anglian smoothing, keeps the *b* in play, and makes a regular stressed half-line (of Sievers' Type A2k (∧/∨(x))). However unexpected the compound, the notion of the woman living under a heathen shrine is in keeping with the sinister effect of lines 29–32, in which she describes herself in an ancient *eorðsele* ('earth-hall', line 29) in a dark valley enclosed by high hills and briars. Line 27, as a variant, *Hebt mec mon wunian on wuda bearwe* ('A man bid me dwell' or 'I was told to dwell in a wood grove'), seems to confirm the unnamed lord's instruction to live there.

Who would 'hlaforð min' be on line 15? If we make Radegund a key to the poem, he would be both Chlothar and Christ. It is by Chlothar's order that Radegund was placed in a royal vill at the age of ten, moreover in a land which was not yet fully Christian. The *Vita* written by Fortunatus says much about Radegund's preference for Jesus over Chlothar, who complains 'habere se potius iugalem monacham quam reginam'.⁷¹ Not long after, Radegund is seen in a hair shirt, worshipping Christ in her husband's absence: 'Quis credat, qualiter se orationi defunderet, qualiter se tamquam praesentis Christi pedibus alligaret et, quasi repleta deliciis, sic longo ieiunio satieretur in lacrimis?'⁷² Baudonivia's *Vita*, written after that of Fortunatus in 603 (or 599 × 614), though it represents Radegund as an aristocrat, praises her nonetheless as 'coniuncta terreno principi

⁶⁸ Klinck, *Old English Elegies*, p. 181.

⁶⁹ *Three Old English Elegies*, ed. Leslie, pp. 47, 53–54.

⁷⁰ Mitchell and Robinson, *Guide to Old English*, p. 250. Osborn helpfully suggests MnE *church-yard* as a parallel, in 'The Husband and the *Herbeard*', pp. 2–3.

⁷¹ 'To have yoked himself to a nun more than a queen', ch. 5. *De Vita Radegundis*, ed. Krusch, 367. See also *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages*, ed. and trans. McNamara and Halborg, pp. 72–73, 87–89.

⁷² 'Who might believe how she poured herself out in prayer, how she bound herself to the feet of Christ as if he were there and how thus during long fasting, as if filled up with ecstasies, she sated herself with tears?', ch. 6. *De Vita S. Radegundis*, ed. Krusch, p. 367.

nobilis regina, caelestis plus quam terrena'.⁷³ Perhaps styling her heroine after St Martin of Tours (d. 397), Baudonivia says that Radegund, riding to a banquet one day and hearing that 'fanum, qui a Francis colebatur' lies not far from her road, orders it destroyed against all their threats and weapons: 'Quo facto, virtutem et constantiam reginae omnes admirantes, Domino benedixerunt'.⁷⁴ Shortly afterwards, 'a rege terreno discessit' to become a nun for the Lord, whereupon 'optaret vitam finire, quam regi terreno iterum iungi'.⁷⁵ If we credit this story in the context of *The Wife's Lament*, the compound *herbeard* (line 15) may mean 'temple country' literally, as well as 'temple abode'. The latter, moreover, may have a Christian meaning, alluding to a Christian temple, a cell, in which Radegund gives herself to Jesus as a bride.

This is how, in *The Wife's Lament*, it is both her lord and the Lord who instruct the woman to live in a *herbeard* (line 15), and there the Christ-bride motif continues. After relating her marriage with the murderer (lines 18–21b) – and then, as I have argued, the ironic fulfilment of a vow with her brother (lines 21b–26) – she returns to Jesus by reminding us that she was told to live in a wooded grove, 'under actreow in þam eorðscræfe'.⁷⁶ An oak-tree, worshipped by heathens in Hesse as *robor Iovis* ('Jupiter's oak'), was felled by St Boniface in the 730s.⁷⁷ On the other hand, the word *treow* in 'actreow' ('oak-tree', line 28a) is a common metaphor for the cross;⁷⁸ *wuda bearwe*, if 'wuda' is genitive singular, means 'grove of the tree' (line 27). The piece of 'wood' may likewise refer to the Cross of which Radegund obtained a splinter for her convent. In *Pange lingua*, one of his most famous hymns, Fortunatus says that Christ 'ipse lignum tunc notavit, damna ligni ut solveret'.⁷⁹ In *Vexilla regis prodeunt*, his most famous, which he composed for the dedication of Sainte-Croix, Fortunatus

⁷³ 'A noble queen, more of heaven than of earth, joined to an earthly prince', ch. 1. *De Vita S. Radegundis*, ed. Krusch, p. 380. For the date, Cherewatuk, 'Radegund and the Epistolary Tradition', p. 22, and Glenn, 'Two Lives of Saint Radegund', p. 57. On Baudonivia's style, see also Glenn, pp. 62–64, 68.

⁷⁴ 'A heathen shrine worshipped by the Franks'; 'When this was done, everyone admired the queen's virtue and constancy and gave praise to the Lord', ch. 2. *De Vita S. Radegundis*, ed. Krusch, p. 380.

⁷⁵ 'She left the earthly king', ch. 3; 'she would rather have ended her life than be joined again to the earthly king', ch. 4. *De Vita S. Radegundis*, ed. Krusch, pp. 380, 381.

⁷⁶ 'Under an oak-tree in the earth-cave', line 28.

⁷⁷ *Vitae Sancti Bonifatii Archiepiscopi Moguntini*, ed. W. Levison, MGH, *Scriptores Rerum Germanicarum* 57 (Hanover, 1905), 31, 135.

⁷⁸ S. Horner, 'En/Closed Subjects: *The Wife's Lament* and the Culture of Early Female Monasticism', in *Old English Literature: Critical Essays*, ed. R. M. Liuzza (New Haven, 2002), pp. 381–91, at 386. First published in *Æstel* 2 (1994), 45–61.

⁷⁹ 'Himself chose wood to redeem the damnation caused by wood', line 6. *Venanti Fortunati Opera Poetica*, ed. Leo, p. 28.

ends his fourth stanza by confirming a prophecy from David, 'regnavit a ligno Deus'.⁸⁰

Describing her underground hall as ancient, the woman says *eal ic eom oflongad* ('I am all filled with longing', line 29b). The valleys are dark, the hills high, the *burgtunas* ('enclosures of the fortification', line 31a) made sharp with briars: it is a joyless abode. Then she says, of the man she longs for, that 'Ful oft mec her wrape begeat | fromsiþ frean'.⁸¹ Walking under the oak *geond þas eorðscrafu* ('through these caves', line 36), the woman must wait for him in summer days, i.e. days that seem like the year's longest.

The more this is for Lenten claustration, the more the woman's *frea* is Lord Jesus. Rural solitude and longing for an absent lover are the essentials of Fortunatus' poems to Radegund in Lent. In his *Ad eandem cum se reclauderet* ('To the same lady during her retreat'), Fortunatus refers to a cave and likewise to the relativity of time:

omnibus exclusis **uno** retineberis **antro**:
nos magis includis, quos facis esse foris.
et licet huc lateas brevibus fugitiva diebus,
longior hic mensis quam celer annus erit. (*Carmina* VIII.ix.7–10)⁸²

As for *herbeard* (which Marijane Osborn reads as the cave of Dido and Aeneas),⁸³ Fortunatus asserts that the cave is a temple in his *De virginitate* ('On virginity', 567), in which he refers to temples twice in association with the bride of Christ. In the first instance:

templa creatoris sunt membra pudica puellae
et habitat proprius tale cubile deus.
quantum sponsa potest de virginitate placere
ipsa cui genetrix non nisi virgo placet.⁸⁴ (*Carmina* VIII.iii. 95–98)

Later in the same poem, Fortunatus portrays a nun speaking to the court of heaven as a bride of Christ. Weeping copious tears, the nun begs to know where Jesus is, so that she may follow him:

⁸⁰ 'God has ruled from the wood', line 16. *Venanti Fortunati Opera Poetica*, ed. Leo, p. 34.

⁸¹ 'Full often here it angrily got me, | absence of a king', lines 32b–33a.

⁸² *Venanti Fortunati Opera Poetica*, ed. Leo, p. 195: 'With all shut out, you will be kept in by a **single cave**: you enclose us more whom you cause to be outside. And though you may be hidden, a fugitive, for brief days, this month will be longer than even one swift year'. Emphasis added by author.

⁸³ 'The Husband and the *Herbeard*', pp. 14–15.

⁸⁴ 'A girl's private organs are **temples** of the Creator and such a bed is more suitably occupied by God. How much with virginity can a bride herself be pleasing to Him Whom no mother but a virgin will please?' *Venanti Fortunati Opera Poetica*, ed. Leo, p. 183. Emphasis added by author.

tristis in amplexu pectore saxa premo.
sponso absente manens tam dura cubilia servo,
nec mea quem cupiunt membra tenere queunt.⁸⁵ (*Carmina* VIII.iii. 228–30)

Thus the *frowsip frean* in *The Wife's Lament* (line 33a). The Frankish virgin lives shut away from daylight, complaining that without Jesus 'ipsaque sole micans est mihi caeca dies'.⁸⁶ From the rough winds she looks for answers:

quid mihi de **domino** nuntiet aura **meo**.
proque tuis pedibus cupio caementa lavare,
et tua **templa** mihi tergere crine libet.⁸⁷ (lines 242–44)

Again, in *The Wife's Lament*, in the territory of *blaford min* and *berbeard* on line 15, we may hear an echo of *domino meo*, owner of the *templa* from which He is absent.

Behind Fortunatus' vision of female monasticism in Merovingian Gaul lay a tradition of *sponsa Christi* ('the bride of Christ') which reached back to Carthage in the third century. Here Tertullian (c. 160–220s) cast Jesus initially in the role of an adulterous lover for married Christian women, then as a husband for virgins who vowed lives of celibacy.⁸⁸ The conceit had developed in allegorical readings of the greatest love poem of all, *The Song of Songs*, first as the Lord with Israel, then as Christ with Holy Church or the Soul.⁸⁹ As we have seen through Fortunatus, this union was the spiritual ideal sought by Rade Gund, Agnes and other Frankish nuns in the sixth century. It was also sought by Anglo-Saxon nuns in the seventh. Æthelthryth of Ely (c. 635–79) is said to have preserved her chastity through two marriages, the second with King Ecgrith of Northumbria (c. 645–86); Bede, saying that her body was found uncorrupt sixteen years after her death (in 695),

⁸⁵ 'Sad, I press the stone in an embrace with my breast. With husband absent, so hard a bed I keep when sleeping, nor can my limbs hold the man they desire'. *Venanti Fortunati Opera Poetica*, ed. Leo, p. 187.

⁸⁶ 'The sun-radiant day itself is also blind to me', line 236.

⁸⁷ 'For what word the breeze may bring me of **my Lord**, desiring, too, to wash the floor before your feet, and clean your **shrines** with my hair, if it please'. *Venanti Fortunati Opera Poetica*, ed. Leo, 187. Emphasis added by author.

⁸⁸ D. Elliott, 'Tertullian, the Angelic Life, and the Bride of Christ', in *Gender and Christianity in Medieval Europe: New Perspectives*, ed. L. M. Bitel and F. Lifschitz (Philadelphia, 2008), pp. 16–33, at 21–22.

⁸⁹ R. Bartelmus, 'Von jungfräulichen Huris zu "pflückreifen Trauben" (C. Luxenberg) oder: Vom myrrhegetränkten Venushügel (Hld 4,6) zur Kirche als Braut Gottes. Überlegungen zur Möglichkeit einer theologischen Lesung des Hohenlieds – ausgehend vom Phänomen der Polyvalenz semitischer Lexeme', in 'Sieben Augen auf einem Stein' (Sach 3,9): *Studien zur Literatur des zweiten Tempels: Festschrift Ina Willi-Plein zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. F. Hartenstein and M. Pietsch (Neukirchen-Vluyn, 2007), pp. 21–41.

calls her *sponsa Christi*; in his hymn in her honour, composed not long after, he says: 'Sponsus adest Christus; quid petis, alma, uirum?'⁹⁰

As the nunneries grew in number, bishops assumed a wardship over Jesus' heavenly brides.⁹¹ In the early eighth century, Boniface's correspondence shows how soon exiled nuns might sublimate their feuds and longings in divine language. In a letter to this bishop in 716 × 720, Ecgburg, a nun in Germany, writes of her place in *valle lacrimarum* ('a vale of tears'), saying that 'non sic tempestate iactatus portum nauta desiderat, non sic sitientia imbres arva desiderant, non sic curvo litore anxia filium mater expectat, quam ut ego visibus vestris frueri cupio'.⁹² In another letter to Boniface, sent from England in 719 × 722, Abbess Eangyth, hoping for an *amicus* ('friend'), refers to lonely days when *Sextilis aut Quintilis tempora protelent aestatis* ('time lengthens in July or August'); and to her lack of friends: 'quid dulcius est', she writes, 'quam habeas illum, cum quo omnia possis loqui ut tecum?'⁹³

The *cris de cœur* of these and other nuns have been shown to resemble the plotting, dark valley, listless summer's day and anguish of *The Wife's Lament*.⁹⁴ Evidently over time, the nuns in Frankish minsters, whether east or west of the Rhine, put their intimate feelings into verse. On 23 March 789, Charlemagne issued a reforming edict for Frankish nunneries in which he proclaimed that no abbess was to leave her convent unless by imperial command, 'et earum claustra sint bene fermata, et nullatenus ibi *winileodos* scribere vel mittere praesumant'.⁹⁵ Here it is worth recalling the *burgtunas* around the woman's cave in *The Wife's Lament*, as well as noting the likeness between the *winileod*-genre and the word for the woman's lover which is twice emphasised near the end of the poem: *wine* and then *se min wine*, on lines 49a and 50b.

To sum up, Christ is the fourth man of *The Wife's Lament*, if Radegund's marriage with him is read into the poem. Indeed, without the sanction of the heavenly bridegroom it seems unlikely that this poem also on earthly love could

⁹⁰ 'Christ is there as bridegroom; why, blessed lady, seek a man?', line 31. *Bede: Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. B. Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors, rev. edn (Oxford, 1993), pp. 394 (IV. xix.12) and 398 (IV.xx.29).

⁹¹ McNamara, *Sisters in Arms*, pp. 43–44.

⁹² 'Not so eagerly does the storm-tossed sailor long for the harbour, nor the thirsting fields crave rain, nor the anxious mother on the curved shore await her son, as I long for a sight of you'. 'S. Bonifati et Lulli Epistolae', ed. E. Dümmler, in *Epistolae Merovingici et Karolini Aevi III*, MGH (Berlin, 1892), 215–433, at 260 (VI: *Ep.* XIII.8–12); for a translation, see *The Letters of Saint Boniface*, ed. and trans. E. Emerton, with an introduction by T. F. X. Noble (New York, 2000).

⁹³ 'What is sweeter, as is said, than to have the man with whom you can speak of everything as with yourself?' 'S. Bonifati Epistolae', ed. Dümmler, p. 262 (VI: *Ep.* XIV.19, 23–24).

⁹⁴ Schaefer, 'Two Women in Need of a Friend', pp. 497–514.

⁹⁵ 'And let their cloisters be well enclosed, and let them not presume to write or send "friend-songs" there by any means'. *Legum Sectio II: Capitularis Regum Francorum I*, ed. A. Boretius, MGH (Hanover, 1881), 62–64, at 63 (*Duplex legationis edictum*, §19).

have been written. Through narrative and lyric, the poet represents the voice of a woman with not one man, but four. Finding this out is the first step towards solving his or her riddle in the poem. If we treat the poet's epithets for men as subtle misdirections, rather than random formulae, the woman may be read as Radegund, princess, queen and *sponsa Christi*;⁹⁶ the men as Amalfrid, her first and earthly lover; Chlothar, her hated husband; her beloved brother, whose name does not survive; and heavenly Lord Jesus, whom she loves most of all.

OID IN ENGLISH: ORIGINS OF *THE WIFE'S LAMENT*

As Leslie says, *The Wife's Lament* is 'one of the few poems in Old English literature dealing with the relationship between man and woman, and the only comprehensive study of a woman's thoughts and feelings'.⁹⁷ If *The Wife's Lament* is based on the lover's complaint in *De excidio Thoringiae*, the poem reaches back into pre-Christian antiquity. Venantius Fortunatus' Italian education gave him knowledge of the best pagan poets, including Vergil and Ovid, from whom he borrowed much in *De virginitate* and *De excidio* and shorter poems. The image of ruin in *De excidio* (lines 19–27) is derived from Troy in Vergil's in *Aeneid* II (lines 403–404, 489–90, 551 and 673). For Radegund's *planctus*, Ovid is the main influence. Radegund's line on *undifragas ... procellas* ('wave-tossing gales', line 107) is based on Ariadne to Theseus in *Heroides* X (lines 145–46 and 152), which Ovid based on Catullus' *Epyllion* 64;⁹⁸ behind both poets was Euripides. Elsewhere *De excidio* borrows phrases from Ovid's other abandoned heroines: Phyllis in *Heroides* II.133–36, Briseis in III.16, Phaedra in IV.98; Helen in VIII.22; and Hero with Leander in the *Double Heroides* XVII.22.⁹⁹

From the seventh century into the early ninth in England, where Fortunatus was read ever more often, his poetry helped to revive contact with a sexually more carefree era in which love was unbounded by biblical rules. Aldhelm (d. 709) makes abundant use of pagan poets including Vergil and Ovid, but he appears not to have had or used the *Heroides*,¹⁰⁰ although he borrowed from a wide range of Fortunatus' works and used his *De excidio* (line 101) once in his *Carmen de virginitate* (line 1627).¹⁰¹ In York in the last third of the eighth century, as Peter Godman says, Alcuin's knowledge of all eight books of Fortunatus' occasional and other

⁹⁶ Horner, 'En/Closed Subjects', pp. 387–88.

⁹⁷ *Three Old English Elegies*, ed. Leslie, p. 3.

⁹⁸ B. Pavlock, *Eros, Imitation, and the Epic Tradition* (Ithaca, 1990), pp. 129–45, at 134–35.

⁹⁹ P. Dronke, *Poetic Individuality in The Middle Ages: New Departures in Poetry 1000-1150*, 2nd edn (London, 1986), pp. 17–19. Bulst, 'Radegundis an Amalfrid', p. 50. McNamara, *Sisters in Arms*, pp. 26–33, at 32.

¹⁰⁰ A. Orchard, *The Poetic Art of Aldhelm*, CSASE 8 (Cambridge, 1994), 228–29.

¹⁰¹ Orchard, *Poetic Art of Aldhelm*, pp. 192–95, at 195. See also M. Lapidge, *The Anglo-Saxon Library* (Oxford, 2006), p. 187.

Radegund and Amalfrid in The Wife's Lament

poems appears to have been 'far more extensive than Bede's', despite the lack of any Insular manuscripts of his works before the tenth century.¹⁰² By the end of the eighth century in England and Carolingian Europe, Fortunatus was read widely by men and women of the church for whom, religion notwithstanding, he offered a connection to the finest love poems of Ovid: to the dramatic female voices of the *Heroides*. It was in Alcuin's maturity, on 23 March 789, that his emperor Charlemagne issued the edict against *vinileodos*. This law bears witness to the composition of love poems in the vernacular, perhaps because they were beginning to look less like Fortunatus and more like Ovid. This is the literary culture within which I suggest the poet of *The Wife's Lament*, working in the second half of the eighth century, distilled *De excidio Thoringiae* into an elegiac riddle on St Radegund.

¹⁰² *Alcuin: the Bishops, Kings, and Saints of York*, ed. P. Godman (Oxford, 1982), pp. lxx–lxxi, at lxxi, and 124. See also Lapidge, *Anglo-Saxon Library*, pp. 169 (no. 23), 225 (Bede: no. 236), 231, 233.