

Germanic elegies known as *frauenlieder*, lamentations sung and possibly composed by women. Like its counterpart, "The Wife's Lament," "Wulf and Eadwacer" demonstrates less hope of relief from suffering than do such male-voiced elegies as "The Wanderer" and "The Seafarer," which also appear in *The Exeter Book*. The rhetorical and emotional power of the female voice in "Wulf and Eadwacer" makes it an important poem to consider as part of any women's literary tradition in English, whether or not a woman actually wrote it.

Law codes, wills, and historical documents reveal that some religious and lay women had significant societal powers during the Anglo-Saxon period; they could own, inherit, and bequeath property, administer abbeys or nunneries, and manage estates in their husbands' absence or as widows. Yet most Old English literature portrays a male-centered code of war, heroism, and revenge, a world in which women were absent or, at best, marginal. Female-voiced elegies such as "Wulf and Eadwacer" thus provide a rare picture of Anglo-Saxon women's emotional landscapes, revealing what the historical records sometimes did not: that women were vulnerable to a double sexual standard that punished their transgressions more harshly than those of men and subjected them to the whims of husbands who might be vengeful or abusive.

Wulf and Eadwacer

For my clan he would be like a gift of booty—
they will waste him if he crosses their path.
With us it isn't like that.

5 Wulf is on one island, I on another—
his island is made fast, girded by fens.
Fierce men are on that island.
They will waste him if he crosses their path.
With us it isn't like that.

10 I yearned for Wulf in his harried wandering.
When the weather poured rain I sat here in tears.
When the brash fighter folded me in the branches of his arms,
I felt pleasure, yes, but I felt loathing too.

15 Wulf, my Wulf, to think about you
made me faint with sickness, for you seldom came.
It was my mood of mourning, not want of food.
Do you hear, Eadwacer? Wulf carries our forlorn
whelp to the wood.
Men can easily wrench apart what has never been wedded—
our story together.

970–990?

Margery Kempe

1373?–1438?

Margery Kempe was a religious visionary who traveled widely and was known for her dramatic behavior. An illiterate woman, she was nonetheless well educated for her time, having hired a priest to read English and European religious and mystical texts to her. Kempe was strongly

influenced by the English mystic Richard Rolle's *The Fire of Love* and by the *Revelations* of the Swedish saint Brigitta. Mistaken for a member of the Lollards, a group of church reformers who denounced vices among the clergy and were sometimes burned as heretics, Kempe was arrested several times and interrogated under suspicion of heresy—because of her unorthodox preaching, her episodes of public weeping, and her habitual wearing of white, the traditional symbol of a virginity she no longer possessed.

Details of Kempe's life can be gleaned from her book. Her father, John Burnham, served several terms as mayor of King's Lynn, a village in northeast England. She married John Kempe, a burgher, in 1393, earned a living as a brewer and a miller, and bore thirteen children, of whom, strangely, she almost never speaks. Mentally and physically ill after the birth of her first child—the point at which her narrative begins—Kempe was tormented by a sin so terrible that she found it impossible to confess. Ultimately, she claims, God restored her to sanity and health, and she resumed her worldly preoccupations until the day she experienced the "divine pull" of the Lord, at which time she eschewed sexual activity with her husband and dedicated herself to God. When she was forty years old, she visited the Bishop of Lincoln and the Archbishop of Canterbury, both of whom were perplexed by this odd and confrontational mystic. In 1413 she made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, followed by trips to Assisi and Rome, where she recounts that God asked her to join Him in marriage. During this period she traveled without her husband, an unusually independent and even a dangerous act for a married woman. Later she journeyed throughout England and Europe, enduring many hardships.

Kempe eventually persuaded two reluctant male scribes to take down the text of her life; the manuscript that is preserved, however, is not the one she dictated but another signed by a monk named Salthouse. The role of these male scribes in transmitting Margery's *Book* raises the issue of whether mediated texts by women present their lives and voices with accuracy. Shortly after William Caxton introduced the printing press to England, brief extracts from *The Book of Margery Kempe* were published by Wynkyn de Worde (c. 1500) and Henry Pepwell (1521). Both versions omitted her many references to erotic spirituality and personal eccentricities in favor of a dialogue between an obedient Margery and an instructive God. The complete *Book*, not rediscovered until 1934 and published in its entirety until 1944, reveals an ecstatic visionary who defied the social conventions of her age: she left her husband to pursue her own calling, traveled widely and independently, affirmed her own access to divinity, and dictated a compelling account of it all to two different scribes, insisting that they bring her autobiography to fruition. *The Book of Margery Kempe* emerges as a transgressive medieval text in which the body and desire are inscribed with passion and authority.

— from The Book of Margery Kempe —

CHAPTER 21

Our Lord speaks on the merits of maidenhood, marriage, and widowhood.

AT the time that this creature¹ had revelations, Our Lord said to her: "Daughter, thou art with child."

She said to Him: "Ah! Lord, what shall I do for the keeping of my child?"

Our Lord said: "Dread thee not. I shall arrange for a keeper."

"Lord, I am not worthy to hear Thee speak, and thus to commune with my husband. Nevertheless, it is to me great pain and great dis-ease."

"Therefore it is no sin to thee, daughter, for it is rather to thee reward and merit, and thou shalt have never the less grace, for I will that thou bring Me forth more fruit."

1. Kempe herself, a sentient being.

Then said the creature: "Lord Jesus, this manner of living belongeth to Thy holy maidens."

"Yea, daughter, trow thou right well that I love wives also, and specially those wives who would live chaste if they might have their will, and do their business to please Me as thou dost; for, though the state of maidenhood be more perfect and more holy than the state of widowhood, and the state of widowhood more perfect than the state of wedlock, yet, daughter, I love thee as well as any maiden in the world. No man may hinder Me in loving whom I will, and as much as I will, for love, daughter, quencheth all sin. And therefore ask of Me the gifts of love. There is no gift so holy as is the gift of love, nor anything to be desired so much as love, for love may purchase what it can desire. And therefore, daughter, thou mayest no better please God than continually to think on His love."

Then this creature asked Our Lord how she should best love Him, and Our Lord said:

"Have mind of thy wickedness and think of My goodness."

She said again: "I am the most unworthy creature that ever Thou shewedest grace unto on earth."

"Ah! Daughter," said Our Lord, "fear thee nothing. I take no heed what a man hath been, but I take heed what he will be. Daughter, thou hast despised thyself; therefore thou shalt never be despised of God. Have mind, daughter, what Mary Magdalene was, Mary of Egypt, Saint Paul, and many other saints that are now in Heaven, for of unworthy, I make worthy, and of sinful, I make rightful. And so have I made thee worthy. To Me, once loved, and ever more loved by Me. There is no saint in Heaven that thou wilt speak with, but he shall come to thee. Whom God loveth, they love. When thou pleasest God, thou pleasest His Mother, and all the saints in Heaven. Daughter, I take witness of My Mother, of all the angels in Heaven, and of all the saints in Heaven, that I love thee with all My heart, and I may not forget thy love."

Our Lord said then to His Blissful Mother: "Blessed Mother, tell ye My daughter of the greatness of the love I have unto her."

Then this creature lay still, all in weeping and sobbing as if her heart would have burst for the sweetness of speech that Our Lord spoke unto her soul.

Immediately afterwards, the Queen of Mercy, God's Mother, dallied to the soul of this creature, saying:

"My dearworthy daughter, I bring thee sure tidings, as witness my sweet Son Jesus, with all the angels and all the saints in Heaven who love thee full highly. Daughter, I am thy Mother, thy Lady and thy Mistress, to teach thee in all wise how thou shalt please God best."

She taught this creature and informed her so wonderfully, that she was abashed to say it or tell it to any—the matters were so high and so holy—save only to the anchorite who was her principal confessor, for he had most knowledge of such things. And he charged this creature, by virtue of obedience, to tell him whatever she felt, and so she did.

CHAPTER 22

Our Lord praises her and promises her eternal life.

AS this creature lay in contemplation for weeping, in her spirit she said to Our Lord Jesus Christ:

"Ah! Lord, maidens dance now merrily in Heaven. Shall not I do so? For, because I am no maiden, lack of maidenhood is to me now great sorrow; methinketh I would I had been slain when I was taken from the font-stone, so that I should never

have displeased Thee, and then shouldst Thou, blessed Lord, have had my maidenhood without end. Ah! dear God, I have not loved Thee all the days of my life and that sore rueth me; I have run away from Thee, and Thou hast run after me; I would fall into despair, and Thou wouldst not suffer me."

"Ah! Daughter, how often have I told thee that thy sins are forgiven thee, and that we are united (in love) together without end. Thou art to Me a singular love, daughter, and therefore I promise thee thou shalt have a singular grace in Heaven, daughter, and I promise thee that I shall come to thine end at thy dying with My Blessed Mother, and My holy angels and twelve apostles, Saint Katherine, Saint Margaret, Saint Mary Magdalene and many other saints that are in Heaven, who give great worship to Me for the grace that I give to thee, thy God, thy Lord Jesus. Thou needest dread no grievous pains in thy dying, for thou shalt have thy desire, that is to have more mind of My Passion than of thine own pain. Thou shalt not dread the devil of Hell, for he hath no power in thee. He dreadeth thee more than thou dost him. He is wroth with thee because thou tormentest him more with thy weeping than doth all the fire in Hell; thou winnest many souls from him with thy weeping. And I have promised thee that thou shouldst have no other Purgatory than the slander and speech of the world, for I have chastised thee Myself as I would, by many great dreads and torments that thou hast had with evil spirits, both asleep and awake for many years. And therefore I shall preserve thee at thine end through My mercy, so that they shall have no power over thee either in body or in soul. It is a great grace and miracle that thou hast thy bodily wits, for the vexation thou hast had with them aforetime.

"I have also, daughter, chastised thee with the dread of My Godhead, and many times have I terrified thee with great tempests of winds, so that thou thoughtst vengeance would have fallen on thee for sin. I have proved thee by many tribulations, many great griefs, and many grievous sicknesses, insomuch that thou hast been anointed for death, and all, through My grace, hast thou escaped. Therefore dread the naught, daughter, for with Mine own hands which were nailed to the Cross, I will take thy soul from thy body with great mirth and melody, with sweet smells and good odors, and offer it to My Father in Heaven, where thou shalt see Him face to face, living with Him without end.

"Daughter, thou shalt be right welcome to My Father, and My Mother, and to all My saints in Heaven, for thou hast given them drink full many times with the tears of thine eyes. All My holy saints shall rejoice at thy coming home. Thou shalt be full filled with all manner of love that thou covetest. Then shalt thou bless the time that thou wert wrought, and the Body that thee hath (dearly) bought. He shall have joy in thee and thou in Him without end.

"Daughter, I promise thee the same grace that I promised Saint Katherine, Saint Margaret, Saint Barbara, and Saint Paul, insomuch that what creature on earth unto the Day of Doom asketh thee any boon and believeth that God loveth thee, he shall have his boon or else a better thing. Therefore they that believe that God loveth thee, they shall be blessed without end. The souls in Purgatory shall rejoice in thy coming home, for they know well that God loveth thee specially. And men on earth shall rejoice in God for thee, for He shall work much grace for thee and make all the world to know that God loveth thee. Thou hast been despised for My love and therefore thou shalt be worshipped for My love.

"Daughter, when thou art in Heaven, thou shalt be able to ask what thou wilt, and I shall grant thee all thy desire. I have told thee beforetime that thou art a singular lover, and therefore thou shalt have a singular love in Heaven, a singular reward,

*She's like
a Saint*

and a singular worship. And, forasmuch as thou art a maiden in thy soul, I shall take thee by the one hand in Heaven, and My Mother by the other hand, and so shalt thou dance in Heaven with other holy maidens and virgins, for I may call thee dearly bought, and Mine own dearworthy darling. I shall say to thee, Mine own blessed spouse: 'Welcome to Me with all manner of joy and gladness, here to dwell with Me and never to depart from Me without end, but ever to dwell with Me in joy and bliss, which no eye may see, nor ear hear, nor tongue tell, nor heart think, that I have ordained for thee and all My servants who desire to love and please Me as thou dost.'

CHAPTER 35

She is affected by the sight of children in Rome. She has a long dalliance with Our Lord.

AS this creature was in the Apostles' Church in Rome on Saint Lateran's Day, the Father of Heaven said to her:

"Daughter, I am well pleased with thee, inasmuch as thou believest in all the Sacraments of Holy Church and in all faith that belongeth thereto, and especially because thou believest in the manhood of My Son, and for the great compassion thou hast for His bitter Passion."

Also the Father said to this creature: "Daughter, I will have thee wedded to My Godhead because I shall shew thee My secrets and My counsels, for thou shalt live with Me without end."

Then the creature kept silence in her soul and answered not thereto, for she was full sore afraid of the Godhead; and she had no knowledge of the dalliance of the Godhead, for all her love and all her affection were set in the manhood of Christ, and there-of she had knowledge, and she would not for anything be parted therefrom.

She had so much affection for the manhood of Christ, that when she saw women in Rome bearing children in their arms, if she could ascertain that any were men-children, she would then cry, roar, and weep as if she had seen Christ in His childhood.

And if she might have had her will, oftentimes she would have taken the children out of their mothers' arms and have kissed them in the stead of Christ.

If she saw a seemly man, she had great pain in looking at him, lest she might have seen Him Who was both God and man.

And therefore she cried many times and often when she saw a seemly man, and wept and sobbed full sore on the manhood of Christ, as she went in the streets of Rome, so that they that saw her wondered full much at her, for they knew not the cause.

Therefore it was no wonder if she was still and answered not the Father of Heaven when He told her that she should be wedded to His Godhead.

Then said the Second Person, Christ Jesus, Whose manhood she loved so much, to her:

"What sayest thou, Margery, daughter, to My Father of these words He spake to thee? Art thou well pleased that it be so?"

And then she would not answer the Second Person, but wept wondrous sore, desiring to have still Himself and in no wise to be parted from Him. Then the Second Person in the Trinity answered to His Father for her, and said:

"Father, hold her excused, for she is yet but young, and not fully learned how she should answer."

And then the Father took her by the hand, (ghostly) in her soul, before the Son and the Holy Ghost; and the Mother of Jesus and all the twelve Apostles and Saint

Katherine and Saint Margaret and many other saints and holy virgins with a great multitude of angels, saying to her soul:

"I take thee, Margery, for My wedded wife, for fairer, for fouler, for richer, for poorer, so that thou be kindly and gentle to do as I bid thee. For, daughter, there was never a child so gracious to its mother as I shall be to thee, both in weel and in woe, to help thee and comfort thee. And thereto I make thee surety."

Then the Mother of God, and all the saints that were present in her soul, prayed that they might have much joy together. And then the creature with high devotion with great plenty of tears, thanked God for His ghostly comfort, holding herself, in her own feeling, right unworthy to any such grace as she felt, for she felt many great comforts, both ghostly comforts and bodily ones. Sometimes she felt sweet smells with her nose. They were sweeter, she thought, than ever was any sweet earthly thing that she smelt before, nor could she ever tell how sweet they were, for she thought she might have lived thereby, if they had lasted.

Sometimes she heard with her bodily ears such sounds and melodies that she could not well hear what a man said to her at that time, unless he spoke the louder. These sounds and melodies had she heard nearly every day for the term of twenty-five years, when this book was written, and especially when she was in devout prayer, and also many times while she was at Rome and in England both.

She saw with her bodily eyes many white things flying all about her on every side, as thick, in a manner, as specks in a sunbeam. They were right subtle and comfortable, and the brighter the sun shone, the better might she see them. She saw them many divers times and in many divers places, both in church and in her chamber, at her meat, and at her prayers, in the fields, and in town, both going and sitting. And many times she was afraid what they might be, for she saw them as well at night in darkness, as in daylight. Then, when she was afraid of them, Our Lord said to her:

"By this token, daughter, believe that it is God Who speaketh in thee, for, wheresoever God is, Heaven is, and where God is, there be many angels, and God is in thee and thou art in Him. And therefore be not afraid, daughter, for these be tokens that there are many angels about thee, to keep both day and night so that no devil shall have power over thee, nor evil men to harm thee."

Then from that time forward, she used to say, when she saw them coming: "Benedictus qui venit in nomine Domini."²

Also Our Lord gave her another token which endured about sixteen years, and it increased ever more and more, and that was a flame of fire, wondrous hot and delectable, and right comfortable, not wasting but ever increasing, of love; for though the weather were never so cold, she felt the heat burning in her breast and at her heart, as verily as a man could feel the material fire if he put his hand or his finger therein.

When she first felt the fire of love burning in her breast, she was afraid thereof, and then Our Lord answered to her mind and said:

"Daughter, be not afraid, for this heat is the heat of the Holy Ghost, which shall burn away all thy sins; for the fire of love quencheth all sins. And thou shalt understand by this token that the Holy Ghost is in thee, and thou knowest well that wheresoever the Holy Ghost is, there is the Father, and where the Father is, there is the Son, and so thou hast fully in thy soul all the Holy Trinity. Therefore thou hast great cause to love Me right well; and yet thou shalt have greater cause than ever thou hadst to love Me, for thou shalt hear what thou hast never heard, and see what thou hast never seen, and thou shalt feel what thou hast never felt."

2. "Let us bless those who come in the name of the Lord" (Latin).

She
smells
things

Always
things

Fire

“For daughter, thou art as secure in the love of God, as God is God. Thy soul is more certain of the love of God, than of thine own body, for thy soul shall part from thy body, but God shall never part from thy soul, for they are united together without end. Therefore, daughter, thou hast as great cause to be merry as any lady in this world; and if thou knew, daughter, how much thou pleasest Me when thou sufferest Me wilfully to speak in thee, thou wouldst never do otherwise, for this is a holy life, and the time is right well spent. For daughter, this life pleaseth Me more than the wearing of the haburion or the haircloth, or fasting on bread and water; for, if thou saidst every day a thousand Pater Nosters, thou wouldst not please Me so well as thou dost when thou art in silence and sufferest Me to speak in thy soul.” 1436–38/1501

Allow me to speak through you

—Mystics

Margery Brews Paston

—Women in Middle Ages

1457?–1495

Margery Brews Paston married into the wealthy Paston family of landowners from Norfolk in England; the family’s surviving letters, documents, and deeds from 1422 to 1509 chronicle the political turmoil during the thirty-year War of the Roses alongside daily life in the fifteenth century. John Paston, a third generation member of the family, was wealthy and pious enough to bequeath money to the renowned anchoress JULIAN OF NORWICH, and when his wife died she left additional funds to Julian and three other anchoresses. Their younger son, John Paston III, inherited money from his elder brother, also named John, and shortly thereafter proposed marriage to Margery Brews, whose family offered less money for their daughter than young John Paston needed—the ideology of the era treating women as property to be sold in exchange for other assets. When Margery’s father, Sir Thomas Brews of Sall and Topcroft in Norfolk, initially balked at giving Paston his daughter’s hand, Margery Brews wrote several valentine letters to her prospective husband, entreating him to be faithful to her despite her father’s intransigence. Margery’s plea was complicated by the fact that another woman, a singer with a larger dowry, was reportedly in competition with her for John’s attentions.

After considerable negotiating, Margery Brews and John Paston III were married in 1477; John became a Member of Parliament for Norwich and served for a time as sheriff of Norfolk and Suffolk, and Margery bore two sons, only one of whom lived to adulthood. Although the Paston library contained works by Chaucer and Christine de Pizan as well as Arthurian legends, and Margery could and did read, she apparently dictated her letters; her valentines were penned by her father’s clerk and signed in her own rough scrawl. Six of her letters remain, the two valentines below and four other epistles to her husband that discuss their children and household matters. These domestic letters, along with those by other medieval women, help readers today to “reconstruct a female peopled past” (feminist critic Nina Baym’s phrase) and thereby understand the Old and Middle English literary periods more fully and equitably.

— Letters to her Valentine/fiancé —

To my right well-beloved Valentine, John Paston, Squire, let this bill be delivered, etc.

February 1477

Most revered and worshipful and my right well-beloved Valentine, I recommend myself to you, for I most heartily desire to hear of your welfare, and I beseech