

ENGENDERING *WYRD*: NOTIONAL GENDER ENCODED IN THE OLD ENGLISH POETIC AND PHILOSOPHICAL VOCABULARY¹

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Abstract

This article is a re-assessment of the role of notional gender in Old English poetry and prose, specifically in a poem known today as “The Wanderer” and in King Alfred’s translation of Boethius’ *Consolation of Philosophy*. By examining the glossary evidence and the portrayal of the figures of Fortune and Lady Philosophy in Boethius’ text, we see that Alfred’s translation and the Old English poem have adapted certain ideas about the conventionalized figures of Fortune and Philosophy, both traditionally figured as women, that have made their way into the Old English poetic and philosophical discourses. The term *Wyrd* is scrutinized for its possible gender valences, and we see that both Alfred’s text and the “The Wanderer” invoke ideas from Boethius: that Fortune (*Wyrd*) is fickle, hostile, and unstable, causing the individual to lose stoic virtue. Contemporary scholars tend to reject the idea that *Wyrd* in Old English poetry and prose carried any gender significations; this study argues that in certain instances, such as in “The Wanderer” and Alfred’s Boethius, *Wyrd* carried certain structures of notional gender that should inflect our understanding of this much-discussed word and Old English poetic and philosophical writing.

Philology is the foundation of all study in medieval vernacular texts, and its legacy was long used as insulation from contemporary critical theory. More recently the insights of feminisms and post-structuralism have belatedly earned a place within the discipline. We cannot talk about Old English literature without discussing the discipline’s history and current state; we cannot access the texts of the Old English period without first looking at our own historically situated context: neither the philologist nor the “theoretical” projects have reached their respective conclusions, and some ask whether the firewall between “philology” and “theory” can remain intact.² Being a philologist in the twenty-first century is indeed a noble calling,³ but the historical achievements of the discipline and the venerability of its scholars and advocates do not obviate the need to reflect critically on the methodologies we employ. As Katherine O’Brien O’Keefe

has noted, philology has been criticized for being “a hermeneutics without politics (or with a covert or unconscious politics)” that clings to the remaining threads of a discredited nineteenth century notion of objectivity.⁴ This criticism may or may not have a place in the present discussions of the discipline, but the relative paucity of the textual poetic evidence means that discussion of poetic texts inevitably and necessarily devolves onto the discussions of secondary texts and the methodologies they deploy and enunciate. It has always been the case that the philological is in fact theoretical, and speculative about matters of literary interpretation, if we take philology in its broadest sense,⁵ in the tradition of Grimm and others who first accessed the literary and linguistic codes of early English and other Germanic texts. Whether texts are scarce or plentiful, we should be mindful of the fact that the sort of supplemental textual activity – the acts of interpretation, copying, scholarship, and glossing – that make poetic and other texts intelligible have always been with us. These activities were especially central and widespread in the Old English period. So the fact that there is an ever-growing abundance of supplemental texts to engage should not surprise; it has always been this way.⁶

A recent succession of female and feminist scholars⁷ have joined the glossing tradition, asking about the absence of women and the valences of gender in Old English language and culture. Feminist criticism and scholarship, in its progression from the search for a female “hero” to the current state of strengthened theoretical discourse and disciplinary flux, has given us new discussions, and new ways of reading the texts that were formerly central and now marginalized in English studies. If we are no longer content to leave “absence” untheorized,⁸ an awareness of the interplay of language and gender (grammatical and notional) can give contemporary readers new pathways into the thought-worlds the oldest English texts. Recent work on gender at both the level of critical theory and textual analysis has interrogated masculinities as well as women and the valences of femininity. In that vein, the goal of this discussion is to elucidate some of the ideas about gender encoded in certain elements of the Old English poetic and philosophical vocabulary, with special attention to the word *Wyrð*. The work of post-structuralisms, feminism, philology, and the work of the poetic texts known collectively today as Old English all share interest in words as the basic units of comprehension: words are signs that set off chains of metonymic and metaphoric associations, of other words, of other texts, of other real and imagined people, things, places, events, and thoughts. Old English poetry generates signification by metonymy

and apposition, so it may be that the more we understand about the valences of keywords in the Old English vocabulary, especially those that carry gendered meanings, the more we might understand the texts that interest us, and the more we might understand about the available ranges of gender in the Anglo-Saxon era.

Wyrð is a noun and is the etymon of the Present Day English adjective “weird.” In the Old English period it has a variety of active senses as attested by glossary evidence, prose, and poetical texts. It was a highly versatile, and perhaps even contested term, appearing 70+ times in the roughly 10,000 lines of existing Old English poetry. Its meaning has certainly been contested in the last 100 years or so of Anglo Saxon philology and literary criticism.

Wyrð: noun (f.); *fate, fortune, destiny, the Fates, history, events, “what happens,” sometimes synonymous with “death.”*⁹

The nineteenth century philologist and mythographer Jakob Grimm firmly identified Old English *wyrð* with the Germanic goddess of Fate and Fortune, finding analogues in Old Norse “urðr” – one of the Norns, or three goddesses of fate that determine the length of one’s life.

Grimm: OE *wyrð* → ON *urðr*

The Norns: *Urðr, Verðandi, Skuld* (“What was, What is, What shall be”)¹⁰

Many early twentieth century scholars were not at all shy about identifying *wyrð* with a personified goddess of fate or fortune, as they looked for traces of “pagan” or Germanic mythology and philosophy beneath what they saw as foreign accretions of Christianity on the oral-formulaic poetry of the *volc*.¹¹ By mid century however scholars had come to recognize the highly literate Christian and monastic contexts for most of Old English literature, and had roundly rejected the idea of *wyrð* as a goddess or personification of any kind.¹² Moreover, because all extant Old English literature had been written within the era of Anglo-Saxon Christianity (post 700 CE), they reasoned, it was nineteenth century romantic folly to imagine a pagan meaning for *wyrð*. Because the Anglo-Saxons adapted their native vocabulary to the new religion, emptying their words of whatever pre-Christian significations they carried, words such as *wyrð* can only connote aspects of Christian Divine providence.¹³ Both romantic mythological criticism and Christian exegesis ignore the syncretism inherent in much of Old English literature: it is a mixture of not only traditional Anglo-Saxon culture, but Latin Patristics, classical culture, Norse and Celtic themes. In discussions

of Old English texts and culture, a binary opposition of “pagan” vs. “Christian” cannot be productive, because most of the poetic texts themselves steadfastly refuse to privilege Christ to the complete exclusion of Ingeld, or *vice versa*.

The goal of this study is not to resurrect a pagan goddess, but rather to explore the connotations of gender that are active in the term *wyrd* in two important Old English texts: King Alfred’s translation of the *Consolation of Philosophy*, and poem known today as “The Wanderer.” We can prepare for this discussion with a brief look at the medieval gloss evidence.

Selected Gloss Evidence on Wyrd¹⁴

Corpus Glosses (ca. 725)

[3383 (6.256)] **Fortuna wyrd.**

[5692 (14.16)] **Parc wyrde.**

Harley Glosses (ca. 1000)

[3699 (F988)] Furtunum [read: **fortunam**] fatum **gewif wyrd**

MS Cotton Cleopatra (ca. 1150)

[2331 (2354)] **Fortunæ wyrde.**

[2332 (2355)] **Fortuna wyrd.**

[2609 (2632)] **Fatis wyrдум.**

[4785 (4807)] **Parce wyrde.**

Catholicon Anglicum (1483)¹⁵

Parcae: Wyrdis

Medulla Grammaticae (Canterbury MS) (late 15th C.)¹⁶

Cloto: Oon of the shap systers or **wyrd systers**

This list shows just some of the occurrences of *wyrd* in the English-Latin glossaries from the middle ages. The conventional female icons of fortune and the term *wyrd* apparently had a long semantic association. *Wyrd* is a gloss for Latin *Fortuna* (fortune) and *Parcae*, the goddesses of Fate in Roman mythology. The cult of the goddess *Fortuna* was active throughout the classical era and into the 4th century of the Common Era.¹⁷ The glosses corroborate what visual and literary culture also attest: that the figure of *Fortuna*, portrayed as a woman, and the *Parcae*, also female, survive well into the later middle ages and beyond, long after belief in such deities had been set aside.¹⁸ *Wyrd* appears to have been, at least by association, if not inherently, notionally feminine in some Old English texts, and long after the post-Conquest transformation of the language, as the occurrence of the term “wyrd systers” in a late 15th century glossary shows.

What was the quality of Fortune’s gender in the middle ages? Our most apposite source of evidence for that question is undoubtedly

Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*. And to understand the portrayal of Fortune and her gendered qualities, we must also look at the portrayal of her oppositional counterpart, Lady Philosophy.

Boethius was a sixth century senator in the Western Roman empire under the Ostrogoth emperor Theodoric. Implicated in a plot to depose Theodoric, Boethius was imprisoned. Awaiting execution he composed his book *De Consolatione Philosophiae*.¹⁹ Often noted as the last gasp of late classical philosophy, Boethius' "When Bad Things Happen to Good People" attempts to show how everything that happens must in fact be good, because it is ultimately under the control of heaven and part of divine providence. Boethius' narrator bemoans his state, falsely imprisoned and facing death, by blaming Fortune for turning her back on him, when she had once smiled on him and lavished him with all good things. Suddenly a regal and maternal woman appears (Lady Philosophy) who leads him through a Socratic dialogue on the nature of Fortune, Fate, and providence. Boethius, on the 'gendered' qualities of Lady Philosophy, describes her thus:

... there seemed to stand above my head a woman. Her look filled me with awe; her burning eyes penetrated me more deeply than those of ordinary men; her complexion was fresh with an ever-lively bloom, yet she seemed so ancient that none would think her of our time. It was difficult to say how tall she might be, for at one time seemed to confine herself to the ordinary measure of man, and at another the crown of her head seemed to touch the heavens; and when she lifted her head higher yet, she penetrated the heavens themselves, and was lost to the sight of men. Her dress was made of very fine, imperishable thread, of delicate workmanship: she herself wove it, as I learned later, for she told me ... But violent hands had ripped this dress and torn away what bits they could. In her right hand she carried a book, and in her left, a sceptre ... Then, gazing keenly and directly on me, she said: "Are you the same man who was once nourished on my milk, once fed on my diet, till you reached full manhood?" ... So, when I looked on her clearly and steadily, I saw the nurse who brought me up, whose house I had in my youth frequented, the lady Philosophy (Stewart, Rand and Tester (eds.) [1918], 133, 135, 139, 141).²⁰

Boethius' portrayal of Philosophy invokes several feminine stereotypes: queen, admonishing mother, and nurturer. Personification of abstract nouns as female was of course common in Latin rhetoric – partly because most of them were grammatically feminine. Roman ideals of female probity, chastity, and maternity are rolled into the persona of Lady Philosophy.

Fortune, by contrast, is given a different treatment. Boethius complains about *Fortuna*:

“...Is my harsh treatment at fortune’s hands not obvious enough? ... Was fortune not the least bit ashamed, if not that innocence was thus accused, at least that the accusers were so base?” (147, 151).²¹

And Philosophy explains the workings of *Fortuna*:

“You imagine that fortune’s attitude toward you has changed; you are wrong. Such was always her way, such is her nature. Instead, all she has done in your case is remain constant to her own inconstancy; she was just the same when she was smiling, when she deluded you with the allurements of her false happiness. You have merely discovered the changing face of that blind power [random or mysterious goddess/deity, *caeci numinis*]; she who still conceals herself from others has completely revealed herself to you. If you like her, follow her ways without complaint. If you abhor her treachery, spurn and reject her, that sports so to a man’s destruction... For she has left you; and no-one will ever be able to feel sure that she is not going to leave him” (177).²²

Although we have little direct portrayal of her, Fortune in Boethius seems to embody a number of other qualities in an oppositional relationship to Philosophy. Where Lady Philosophy is constant, Fortune is fickle. Where Philosophy rewards merit, study, and discipline, Fortune distributes her gifts unequally to fool, coward, and criminal alike. Fortune is not to be chided or cursed however, for she is constant in her inconstancy, and no one who is wise expects her gifts to last forever. To expect to be always on Fortune’s good side is to be her fool, and only those who forget the lessons of Philosophy will not complain when her gifts are taken away.

It may after all be difficult to make strong connections between women and the symbolically feminine in late antiquity and the middle ages, but deployments of metaphorical and notional gender should be given close scrutiny where the historical record offers little information about women. And in the case of the Anglo-Saxon period in England, that record is sparse enough. But a closer look at gender signifiers, linguistic and semantic, in King Alfred’s translation of Boethius may give us a better idea of the available valences of masculinity and femininity. As Clare Lees and Gillian Overing remark in their recent book on female monastic culture in the Anglo-Saxon period, “Metaphors are ways of knowing, even as they structure that knowing ... We consider what it means when a metaphor is alive and thriving, and the body it signifies is long dead.”²³

Alfred Glosses Boethius

Alfred in his translation of the *Consolation* is concerned with the same issues that occupied Boethius, but Alfred is interested in finding a particular native vocabulary and set of images and

personifications that would resonate with his audience: vernacular speakers and auditors in the Anglo-Saxon aristocracy who ought to share Alfred's interest in stoic Christian self-governance and statecraft. Alfred makes some interesting changes to his source. He re-christens Lady Philosophy as its closest Old English equivalent, Wisdom, thus making her grammatically and (I argue) notionally male. But Wisdom's first appearance is marked by what we might today consider a highly gendered performance:

On the "gendered" qualities of Wisdom:

"... þa com þær gan in to me heofencund Wisdom, & þæt min murnende mod mid his wordum gegrette, & þus cwæð: Hu ne eart ðu se mon þe on minre scole wære afeð & gelæred? ... Ða eode se Wisdom near, cwæð Boethius, ... adrigde þa mines modes eagan, & hit fran bliþum wordum hwæðer hit oncneowe his fostermodor. . . þa gecneow hit swiðe sweotele his agne modor ..." (Sedgefield pp. 8–9)²⁴

"... then came there to me heavenly Wisdom, and greeted my mourning mind with his words, and said thus: How! Are you not the man who was fed and taught in my school? ... 'Then Wisdom [masculine] came near,' said Boethius, ... '[and] dried the eyes of my mind, and asked me with sweet words whether it knew its foster mother ... then it [Boethius' mind] knew its immediately and clearly its own mother.'" [sp1]

Wisdom instantly changes gender both grammatically and in his persona the moment he acts as a comforting nurturing *modor*. But thereafter Alfred leaves aside Boethius' Roman feminine ideals, changing the figure of the regal, maternal Lady Philosophy into a more abstracted but clearly male persona who leads the narrator – sometimes called Boethius, sometime called *Mod* (mind) – into a dialogue that is more recognizably Christian than Boethius' neo-Platonism.

Alfred uses the term *Wyrð* to translate *Fortuna*, but also to translate *Fatum*. And where Boethius uses *fortuna* (a generalized term, distinct from the personification) to refer to worldly rewards, Alfred uses the native term *woruldsælða* to denote Fortune's rewards, or worldly goods. This deliberate word choice highlights the differences between the ideas of *wyrð* as an abstract word for "events," the things of this world, and the force that plays a primary and powerful role as an arranger of fortunes and destinies. The question remains: does *Fortuna*, here called *Wyrð*,²⁵ retain her gendered qualities in Alfred's text? One clue comes early in the text, where Alfred inserts his own interpolation on the nature of *Wyrð*, and its place in the Boethian/Christian teleology. After lamenting *Wyrð*'s inconstancy, Alfred's narrator cries out:

“Hwy þu la Drihten æfre woldest & seo wyrð swa hwyrðan sceolde? Heo þreat þa unscildingum & nauht ne ðreap þam scildingum. Sittað manfulle on heahsetetum, & halige under heora fotum þrycað ... Forþam went nu fulneah eall moncyn on tweonunga, gif seo wyrð swa hweorfan mot on yfelra manna gewill, & þu heore nelt stiran” (Sedgefield 10).

“Why would you ever allow, Lord, that *Wyrð* should change so? She harasses the sinless and never frightens the sinful. Criminals sit in high places, and the holy are trampled under their feet ... Therefore nearly all mankind is coming to wonder whether or not *Wyrð* may change according to the will of evil men, and you will not control [literally: steer] her!”

Wyrð is random, fickle and arbitrary, but she is also hostile to the good. Her workings are unintelligible to the majority of men, and it appears that God is unwilling to control her. His complaint is not only that she is inconstant, but also that she is too powerful, elevating the wicked and oppressing the righteous. *Seo wyrð* with the feminine definite article seems here to denote the personified feminine figure from Boethius, *Fortuna*, as opposed to the more general sense, “what happens” or “worldly events.” And it appears the use of that definite article is deliberate, to distinguish *Wyrð* from its more abstract and general significations, but also to highlight its gender.²⁶ In highlighting its femininity, Alfred’s text creates a gendered opposition between the feminine *seo Wyrð* and the masculine *se Wisdom*, apparently linking both grammatical and notional gender. But the connection is unstable and perhaps troubled by the fact that notional gender is here defined entirely on performance rather than external attributes. Where Boethius’ Lady Philosophy is clearly and unmistakably imagined as a woman (though an extraordinary one), Alfred’s text gives us no description to help us conjure the image of Wisdom. Alfred’s Boethian exchange transforms Boethius’ corporeal imprisonment and interaction with Philosophy into the realm of pure mental abstraction. Boethius’ tears exist only in the mind in Alfred’s text (as Wisdom dries “*modes eagan*”: the eyes of the mind). This non-corporeal (though still gendered) characterization throws the issue of gender into stark relief for this moment in the text. Wisdom’s power accesses both masculine and feminine, even if only briefly, and does so at a crucial moment in the text when the Boethian narrator is at his lowest point. It is as if at the point of direst despair, Wisdom can become a mother just long enough evoke the image of maternal and feminine comfort, to draw the figure of Mod/Boethius out of his misery, before reverting back to a more abstract actor who reconnects the narrator to the wisdom of the Father.²⁷

Wisdom's answer to Alfred's (or Boethius') entreaty is just as telling in terms of the structures of gender that it invokes.

"Sona swa ic þe ærest on þisse unrotnesse geseah þus murciende ic ongeat þæt þu wære ut afaren of **þines fæder eðele**, þæt is for minum larum. Þær þæt ðu him fore of þa þu þine fæstrædnesse forlete, & wendest þæt seo weord [another MS has: *sio wyrð*] þas world wende heore agenes ðonces buton Godes geþeahthe & his þafunge & monna gewyhrtum." (Sedgefield p. 11).

"As soon as I first saw you complaining so in this sadness I perceived that you had wandered far from **your father's native land**, that is, from my teachings. When you departed from there you let go of your fixity of mind, and believed that Wyrð may change this world according to her own desires without God's advice and consent, and men's deeds."

Despite his episode of "mothering" a short time earlier, Wisdom's teaching is now figured as the *patria*, or the father's native land, signified by the Old English *þines fæder eðele*. As the narrator is bemoaning his ill treatment by Fortune, he is under the sway of *Wyrð*, in a kind of intellectual exile, wandering far removed from the teachings of the Father. His loss of *fæstrædnesse*, self-control or resolution, in the face of tribulations causes him to cry out in "sorrowful exclamations" or *sarewide*, which denote a loss of stoic Christian (and traditional, even clichéd, Germanic) virtue.²⁸ And it is the rupture of this stoicism and the need to speak of the isolation and pain of exile that form the central concern of much of the elegiac Old English poetry. But the structure of the Boethian teleology as Wisdom explains it brings *Wyrð* under the control of God the Father and his divine providence. *Wyrð* can do nothing of herself, says Wisdom, and everything she does is by definition according to the will of God. To wander as an exile in "far from the father's native land," to forget the lessons of Wisdom, is to be in the outland, the marginal psychic and physical regions controlled by *Wyrð*.

Wyrð and Wisdom: "Glossing" Elegy

Much of the Old English poetry we today call "elegiac" is concerned with discerning and making sense of the workings of *Wyrð*, and often takes form of an internalized Boethian/Alfredian dialectic.²⁹ Certainly this is true of a poem known today as "The Wanderer." This text is a poem that mourns the passing of the "good old days" of an idealized hyper-masculine world of Anglo-Saxon warrior culture from the perspective of an exile whose lord has died.

Oft him anhaga are gebideð,
 metudes miltse, þeahþe he modcearig
 geond lagulade longe sceolde
 hreran mid hondum hrimcealde sæ,
 wadan wræclastas: wyrd bið ful aræd.³⁰
 (1–5)

Often the solitary exile awaits mercy,
 the favor of a lord, although he must for an intolerably long time,
 sad-hearted, wander the paths of exile,
 and heave the ice-cold sea under the power of his hands:
 Wyrd is completely in control.³¹

The exile is *eðele bidæled* and *freomægum feor*: deprived of a homeland and far from kinsmen (20–21). The condition of exile is like that of Alfred's Boethian narrator – far removed from the *eðel* or the native land of his lord, wandering through an exterior landscape of winter desolation, and the interior regions of the mind under the sway of *Wyrd*: Boethius' random and hostile feminine principle, who seems to constantly change and cause things to fall apart, and who is at times seemingly irreconcilable with the will of God. The exile in this poem would prefer to keep silent about his troubles, but it seems impossible in the face of the mounting power of *Wyrd*.

...Ic to soþe wat
 þæt biþ in eorle indryhtenþeaw
 þæt he his ferðlocan fæste binde,
 healde his hordcofan, hycge swa he wille.
 Ne mæg werig mod wyrde wiðstandan,
 ne se hreo hyge helpe gefremman. (11–16)

... I know it to be true
 that it is a noble custom for a man
 to bind fast the lock of his heart
 and should hold his words, whatever he may think.
 [But] the weary mind cannot withstand Wyrd
 nor the furious thought give any kind of help.

When under the influence of *Wyrd*, the narrator tends to no longer face events and ill fortune with stoicism, but instead is given, like Boethius, to bemoaning his condition and longing for his lost worldly goods and his lost male comitatus relationships. Unable to bind his heart, the Wanderer then must narrate the emotional and psychic pain of his exile. And in doing so his longing takes on a particularly homosocial and even homoerotic tenor.

Ðonne sorg and slæp somod ætgædre
 earmne anhogan oft gebindað,

þinceð him on mode þæt he his mondryhten
 clyppe ond cysse ond on cneo legge
 honda ond heafod, swa he hwilum ær
 in geardagum giefstolas breac. (40–44)
 Then sorrow and sleep together at once
 often bind the wretched solitary,
 and it seems to him that he embraces and kisses his man-lord,
 lays his head and hands upon his knee, as he did before,
 in long-gone days, when he enjoyed his place at the gift-throne.

As Alfred turns Boethius' dialogue with Lady Philosophy into a homosocial/patriarchal world of intellectual exchange, the Wanderer posits an idealized world of men, homosociality, giving and reciprocity. But the dream ends and the paths of exile offer nothing but cold, enforced solitude, and the hostile and powerful force of *Wyrð*. His beloved male companions have been swept away by *Wyrð* in her aspect as death in battle.³²

Eorlas fornoman asca þryþe,
 wæpen wælgifru, wyrð seo mære. (99–100)
 Men swept away by the force of spears,
 Weapons greedy for death, Wyrð the mighty.

The gendered oppositions of the idealized male world of the comitatus and the realm of *Wyrð* – the physical landscape of exile and the mental anguish engendered by a hostile and inscrutable Fortune – are given a fittingly Boethian resolution. In the poem's final lines the text urges any who long for the worldly companionship and goods that are the transitory enjoyments of earthly existence, the unsure gifts of Fortune, to return to the "Father's house" of stoic silence and Christian belief. *Wyrð*, in its final appearance in the poem, is associated with the transitory things of this world under heaven, and the poem makes this point as it reaches for a reunification with the Father's *eðele* – the Christian heaven.

Eall is earfoðlic eorþan rice;
 onwendeð wyrða gesceaft weoruld under heofonum. (106–07)
 Everything is uneasy in the regions of the earth;
 The way of wyrd[s] [the course of events] wends away in this world under heaven.

...
 Til biþ se þe his treowe gehealdeþ; ne sceal næfre his torn to rycene
 beorn of his breostum acyþan, nemþe he ær þa bote cunne,
 eorl mid elne gefremman. Wel bið þam þe are seceþ,
 frofre to fæder on heofonum, þær us eal seo fæstnung stondeð.
 (112–115).

He is good who holds to his beliefs; he must never too quickly announce and make known
 the painful thoughts of his heart, unless he already knows the remedy
 and is man enough to make it. It is well for him who seeks the honor,
 the favor of the Father in heaven, where security stands for us all.

Robert Bjork notes that the final occurrence of *wyrd* has little to do with its earlier invocations, and that the structure of the poem dramatically re-codes this keyword as the poem reaches toward its universalizing, Christian conclusion:

At least two changes occurred to *wyrd* here: it occupies the a-line, no longer determining the alliterative pattern, no longer controlling the entire line; and its case has changed to the genitive plural, putting it in a subordinate, modifying relationship ...³³

Bjork rightly notes that, after *Wyrd's* ascendancy in the poem in line 100 (“*Wyrd seo mære*”), its register shifts to “what happens” or “worldly events.” Its presence in the unstressed part of the second half-line indicates its waning power, or its radical shift in definition. As a genitive plural it no longer carries the semiotic freight of notional gender and personification that we recall from Alfred’s Boethius: the fickle, hostile feminized force – *seo Wyrd* – that oppressed the Boethian narrator and the mourning exile of the earlier verses in this poem. *Fortuna* is now merely fortune: either good or ill. *Wyrd* is now merely *wyrd*: whatever is or will be.

The realities of gender and sex that made this opposition of Wisdom and *Wyrd* attractive are not entirely known to us. The connections between the metaphors of gender and the situation of women in the ninth century might reveal themselves in evidence of Anglo-Saxon ambivalence about female power. In the earliest days of the Christian English church, noblewomen from Northumbria and Kent occupied prominent and powerful positions in the church as abbesses of dual-gender monastic houses. We can be relatively certain that women, especially noblewomen given in marriage from the Continent, played paramount roles in the relatively rapid adoption of Christianity in the seventh and eighth centuries. Alfred’s time was the eve of an age of reform in the English church that emphasized, among other things, chastity, the separation of the sexes, and saw far fewer women occupying powerful roles in the church. Whether a “golden age” of Anglo-Saxon female monasticism ever existed or not, by the time of the Norman invasion and occupation, the earlier traditions of female ecclesiastical and political power would have been unrecognizable.³⁴

Alfred's biographer Asser gives further context to a particularly West Saxon anxiety about female political power and queenship. Asser recounts the story of Eadburh, a Mercian woman who was given in marriage to a West Saxon king. She behaved like a tyrant, we are told, and it is said that she accidentally poisoned her husband. Later, in the ninth century, Alfred's father Æthelwulf took a Frankish woman named Judith (not Alfred's mother) as wife. He insisted that she sit on a throne co-equal with him, but Asser denounces him thoroughly, saying, "the West Saxons did not allow her to be called 'queen,' but rather 'king's wife.'"³⁵ This West Saxon concern over female political power may shed some light on Alfred's reluctance to adopt Boethius' regal portrayal of Lady Philosophy, creating instead the "mostly male" figure of Wisdom. Yet at the same time, Alfred was not willing to entirely abandon Lady Philosophy as the admonishing, all-wise mother of Boethius, even though the figure of Wisdom in his translation occupies a gender-ambiguous, perhaps even anxious, place within the ideologically-driven dialogue that is the *Consolation*. We might speculate that the image of regal maternal Lady Philosophy has at least some resonance with King Alfred who, according to Asser's story, was the child who learned to recite vernacular poetry at the urging of his regal mother.³⁶

The association of *Wyrð* with the language of exile from a patriarchal and male-homosocial *eðele* reminds us of Alfred's Boethian translation: the *mod* has wandered far from its "father's homeland," that is, the teachings of Wisdom and its stoic virtues. Wandering both exterior and interior landscapes of exile, separated from the symbolic and worldly order of the father's or lord's *eðele*, we find *Wyrð* apparently run amok in this exilic outland and no male counterparts with whom the exile can exchange words, gestures, gifts. I stress that I do not think that Alfred, the scribe of the Exeter Book manuscript, or anyone living the ninth and tenth centuries actually "believed in" a goddess by the name of *Wyrð*, nor did Boethius in all likelihood "believe in" a goddess called *Fortuna*. *Fortuna* in the Latin tradition was clearly a conventionalized female figure embodying certain conventional notions about female power, sexuality, and mutability. I think the long semantic association of *Wyrð* with *Fortuna* in the glossary and some of the literary evidence points to the availability of a similarly gendered meaning for certain occurrences the Old English term, especially in the somewhat archaic, formulaic discourse of Old English poetry. Whether a figure such as an Anglo-Saxon goddess of fortune ever existed may never be known. If nothing else, the semantic interplay between the gendered significations

elicited by the occurrences of *Wyrd* in “The Wanderer” and Alfred’s Boethius reminds us to be attuned to the gendered nature of language in Old English, where women and notional gender are perhaps conspicuous by their “absence.”

Notes

1. Originally presented March 11, 2004 at the CSUF Conference on Women and Gender.

2. See Allen Frantzen (1990) *Desire for Origins*, New Brunswick: Rutgers UP; and Daniel Donoghue “Language Matters” (1997, p. 60) in Katherine O’Brien O’Keefe (ed.) (1997), *Reading Old English Texts*, Cambridge: UP.

3. According to Donoghue, the term “philology” itself has been weakened to the point of denoting “antiquarianism” in the US, and is still employed in the relatively limited sense of “historical linguistics” in the UK. Of course, when we add the epithet “new” to philology, we turn the “old” philology into something “static” and monolithic (p. 67).

4. O’Brien O’Keefe (1997) “Introduction” in *Reading Old English Texts*, p. 6.

5. As Nietzsche famously put it: “... philology is that venerable art which demands of its votaries one thing above all: to go aside, to take time, to become still, to become slow – it is a goldsmith’s art and connoisseurship of the *word* which achieves nothing if it does not achieve it *lento*...[I]t teaches to read well, that is to read slowly, deeply looking cautiously before and aft, with reservations, with doors left open, with delicate eyes and fingers.” Clark and Leiter, eds. and trans. (1997), p. 5.

6. Pulsiano (2001) notes that glossing was in fact scholarship that produced meaning and placed texts into complex intertextual relationships: Glosses are “pervasive” during this period; they do more than define words. They also “offer interpretation, provide commentary, attest to filiations with earlier authorities, establish a text as within an earlier tradition of copying, and more” (p. 213). They were, in fact, acts of interpretation. See “Prayers, Glosses, and Glossaries” in Phillip Pulsiano and Elaine Treharne (eds.) *A Companion to Anglo-Saxon Literature*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2001.

7. See, among others, Helen Damico (1984) *Beowulf’s Wealthew and the Valkyrie Tradition*, Madison: U Wisconsin P; Jane Chance (1986) *Woman as Hero in Old English Literature*, Syracuse: UP; Gillian Overing (1990) *Language, Sign and Gender in Beowulf*, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press; and Clare A. Lees and Gillian Overing (2003), *Double Agents: Women in Anglo-Saxon Clerical Culture*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania.

8. Lees and Overing (2003), p. 154.

9. Adapted from JR Clark Hall (1960 [1894]) *A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

10. Adapted from Jakob Grimm (1966[1844]) *Teutonic Mythology* 4th ed., James Stallybrass (trans.), New York: Dover, pp. 405-406.

11. See Albert Keiser (1919) *The Influence of Christianity on the Vocabulary of Old English Poetry. Part I*, Urbana: University of Illinois; Dame Bertha Philpotts “Wyrd and Providence in Anglo Saxon Thought,” *Essays and Studies* (1927) 13 7–27.

12. B. J. Timmer “Wyrð in Anglo-Saxon Poetry and Prose,” *Neophilologus* 26 (1941):“... it may be said that wyrð occurs in the prose of Alfred’s time and much after in a much weakened sense and without any associations with a heathen association of Fate” (p. 33). This piece is still the most often cited article on *wyrð*, and one that indicates the genuine need for a reassessment of the evidence, as it seems Timmer’s sole purpose is to limit the semantic field of all occurrences of *wyrð*. Timmer’s analysis is inherently problematic not only for its apparent ideological investment in Patristic readings, but also in that it is still cited unproblematically in recent times; see, e.g. Frakes (1988) *The Fate of Fortune in the Early Middle Ages: The Boethian Tradition*, Leiden: EJ Brill.

13. E. G. Stanley (1975) *The Search for Anglo-Saxon Paganism*, Cambridge: DS Brewer.

14. Corpus glosses, Harley glosses, and MS Cotton Cleopatra accessed online via Dictionary of Old English Corpus online at <http://www.chass.utoronto.ca/oec/restrict.html>. Accessed February 1, 2004.

15. *Catholicon anglicum*, an *English–Latin Wordbook, dated 1483*. ed. from the MS. no. 168 in the Library of Lord Monson, collated with the Additional MS. 15,562, British Museum. With introduction and notes, by Sidney J. H. Herrtage; with a preface by Henry B. Wheatley. [Westminster] Printed for the Camden Society, 1882. Imprint New York: Johnson Reprint Corp. [1965]

16. *Medulla Grammaticae*, unpublished Latin–Middle English glossary tradition ca. 1475–1550. This citation accessed in *Middle English Dictionary* research slips, Ann Arbor, Michigan. Vincent McCarren is currently producing an edition of the Stonyhurst MS of the *Medulla Grammaticae*.

17. R. Howard Patch (1927) *The Goddess Fortuna in Medieval Literature*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard (p. 6).

18. See Frakes (1988) pp. 20–21 and *passim*.

19. All citations from Boethius come from H. F. Stewart, E. K. Rand, and S. J. Tester, eds. (1918) *Boethius: Tractates, The Consolation of Philosophy*, Loeb Classical Library (LCL 74), Cambridge, MA: Harvard. Translations are those of the editors.

20. ... adstittisse mihi supra verticem visa est mulier reverendi admodum vultus, oculis ardentibus et ultra communem hominum valentiam perspicacibus colore vivido atque inexhausti vigoris, quamvis ita aevi plena foret ut nullo modo nostrae crederetur aetatis, statura discretionis ambiguae. Nam nunc quidem ad communem sese hominum mensuram cohibebat, nunc vero pulsare caelum summi verticis cacumine videbatur; quae cum altius caput extulisset, ipsum etiam caelum penetrebat respicientiumque hominum frustrabatur intuitum. Vestes erant tenuissimis filis subtili artificio, indissolubili materia perfectae quas, uti post eadem prodente cognovi, suis manibus ipsa texuerat... Eandem tamen vestem violentorum quorundam sciderant manus et particulas quas quisque potuit abstulerant. Et dextera quidem eius libellos, sceptrum vero sinistra gestabat.... Tum vero totis in me intenta luminibus: “Tunc ille es,” ait, “qui nostro quondam lacte nutritus nostris educatus alimentis in virilis animi robur evaseras?” ...Itaque ubi in eam deduxi oculos intuitumque defixi, respicio nutricem meam cuius ab adulescentia laribus obversatus fueram Philosophiam.

21.Anne adhuc eget admonitione nec per statis eminent fortunae in nos saevientis asperitas? ...Itane nihil fortunam pudit si minus accusatae innocentiae, at accusantium vilitatis?

22. Tu fortunam putas erga te esse mutatam; erras. Hi semper eius mores sunt ista natura. Servavit circa te propriam potius in ipsa sui mutabilitate constantiam. Talis erat cum blandiebatur, cum tibi falsae inlecebris felicitatis alluderet. Deprehendisti

caeci numinis ambiguos vultus. Quae sese adhuc velat aliis, tota tibi prorsus innouit. Si probas, utere moribus; ne queraris. Si perfidiam perhorrescis, sperne atque abice perniciose ludentem. ... Reliquit enim te quam nonrelicturam nemo umquam poterit esse sercurus.

23. Lees and Overing (2003), p. 154.

24. All citations of King Alfred's translation of the *Consolation* are from Walter John Sedgfield (1899) *King Alfred's Old English Version of Boethius De Consolatione Philosophiae*, Oxford: Clarendon. Translations are mine.

25. I have, for the sake of the argument in this article, capitalized *Wyrd* where I believe it denotes a conventionally feminine personified figure roughly equivalent to *Fortuna* in Boethius. The same word spelled with a lowercase *w* denotes the somewhat more prosaic or non-personified sense of "events" or "what happens."

26. Contrast Frakes (1988), who rejects any notion of *wyrd's* gender significance or personification in Alfred's or any other Old English text, pp. 87, 96. Note also contemporary linguistics, which regards with skepticism a connection between grammatical and notional gender in Old English, even though that same relationship exists in Latin rhetoric. A more nuanced view is that of Anne Curzan (2003) *Gender Shifts in the History of English*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Curzan's valuable study shows how fluid and complex the history of gender signifiers – linguistic and notional – is in English. She notes that the commonly accepted view that grammatical gender bears no relationship to natural gender or sex "demands qualification there is a semantic core to the system" (p. 16).

27. An excursus into psychoanalytic theory and criticism is beyond the scope of this study. Nevertheless it is difficult to reflect on these corresponding passages in both Boethius' *Consolation* and Alfred's translation without being reminded of Lacanian/Kristevan interpretations of the subject's relationship to mother and father. Particularly, we wonder whether Lady Philosophy (and Wisdom as well) can be read in light of Kristeva's phallic mother, her revision of Lacan's notion of the phallus as privileged signifier. Kristeva explains: "Any subject posits himself in relation to the phallus – that much everyone understands. That the phallus could be the mother is something often said, but we are stopped short by this 'truth': the hysteric, the obsessed, the fetishist, and the schizoid....No language can sing unless it confronts the Phallic Mother." (Kristeva, p. 191). In other words, this confrontation of the Mother who is the Platonic interlocutor, who leads the subject to a new and greater understanding of the subject's psychic and ethical dilemma a necessary component at a moment of crisis, especially when that crisis is understood and played out in language and imagery that is heavily inflected by notional gender.

28. Note also the anxiety over the loss of self-control portrayed in Book I of the *Consolation* where Philosophy banishes the "theatrical tarts" [*scenicas meretriculas*] – the muses of lyric/elegiac poetry. (Stewart et al. p. 134). The "consolation" of Philosophy is offered as an alternative psychic healing process to the consolations of *sarcwide*, (*carmina* in Boethius). This is the same psychic and ethical dilemma of the Wanderer 11. 11–16 (discussed below), where the speaker reflects that it is better to keep silent about Fortune's (*Wyrd's*) mistreatment, rather than unlock the contents of his heart in lamentation. The poem is itself in a sense doomed by its own ethic and ideology of stoicism; or perhaps seeks its own alternative: the transcendence of elegy through the exhaustion and rupture of its generic structures and possibilities, culminating in the final (hypermetric, and therefore flawed?) lines that seek higher consolation of security in heaven.

29. This study is not the first to argue for a connection between the elegiac poetry and Boethius' *Consolation*. See, e.g. A.D. Horgan (Feb., 1987), "The Wanderer: A Boethian Poem?" *The Review of English Studies*, n.s. 38 (149), pp. 40–46. Horgan is primarily interested in the poem's structure and how it mirrors the progress of the Boethian narrator. He does not discuss Alfred's translation. There may be some textual evidence for an association between the Old English *Consolation* and "The Wanderer": Michael Lapidge notes in his chapter "Surviving Booklists from Anglo-Saxon England" that among the books donated by Bishop Leofric to Exeter Cathedral were both the codex known today as the Exeter Book (containing "The Wanderer," "The Seafarer," "The Wife's Lament," "Resignation," and other texts valued today as Old English poetry), and a "Boetis boc on englisc." In a tantalizing coincidence, the Old English Boethius and the Exeter anthology are listed consecutively to one another in a list of fifty-five items. Might this indicate some kind of semantic association? Or were they lumped together because they were both in English, whereas the majority of Leofric's library was comprised of Latin patristic, computational, and service-books? See Lapidge (1985) in Lapidge and Helmut Gneuss (eds.) *Literature and Learning in Anglo-Saxon England: Studies Presented to Peter Clemoes on the Occasion of his Sixty-Fifth Birthday*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 33–90.

30. All citations from "The Wanderer" come from Anne L. Klinck (Ed.) (1992) *The Old English Elegies of the Exeter Book: A Critical Edition and Genre Study*, Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, pp. 75–78.

31. I have deliberately shirked the translator's duty to provide a Present Day English equivalent of *Wyrð*, in a perhaps maladroit attempt to listen for the play of signification for this term, keeping the evidence previously cited about its Anglo-Saxon context in mind. The verb-form *aræd* (from *arædan*) has always been a problem for editors and readers of "The Wanderer." It has never been finally or successfully explicated. It is most commonly translated as "fixed," "resolute" or "inexorable." I contend, contrary to Bjork (1989/2000) and others, that *aræd* should here *not* be read as a word connoting concepts of fixity and immutability. Clark-Hall (1960) lists a number of perhaps more probable and intriguing readings for the verb *arædan*: *arrange, settle, guess, prophesy, interpret, or read*. These words suggest power, influence, control, but not necessarily immutability or fixity. We might offer a reading of this line that suggests that *Wyrð* is a force that is "having its say" for the time being, if you will. Certainly, the poem's resolution implies that, whatever the situation is at the beginning of the poem, the narrative voice has a different view of the situation by the end of the poem. That is, *Wyrð* is fully in control right now, though the situation is not irreversible, or "fated" to be so. We may also note the possible relationship between *arædan* and *fastrædnesse*, noted above. *Fastrædnesse*, or resolution and self-governance is not a permanent state either, but a condition that is valued, sought after, but precarious. Bjork's 1989 article ("Sundor æt rune: The voluntary exile of the Wanderer" *Neophilologus* 73, pp. 119–129) remains an inescapably crucial reading of "The Wanderer," and the debt owed by this argument to his reading of the poem will be treated further below.

32. Alfred's translation of the *Consolation* may be apposite here as well. Joseph Wittig (1983) notes that Alfred glosses and interpolates (in one of the meters concerning Orpheus) the "*deae*" who avenge sins of men as the "*Parcas*," or the Fates, when in fact the reference intended is to the Furies or Eumenides. See Wittig (1983) "Alfred's Boethius and its Latin Sources: a reconsideration," *Anglo-Saxon England* (11), pp. 157–198. The passage "Quae sontes agitant metu/Ultrices scelerum deae/Iam maestae lacrimis madent" (Goddess-avengers of men's crimes who make/The

guilty quake with fear/Now full of sadness melt in tears) is rendered with interpolations by Alfred as: Ða eode he furður, oð he gemete ða gramena metena [another MS has 'gydena' – goddesses] ðe folcisce men hatað Parcas, ða hi secgað ðæt on nanum men nyton nane are, ac ælcum men wrecen be his gewyhrtum; þa he secgað ðæt walden ælces mannes wyrde ...” (Then he went further until he had met the angry measurers [goddesses] that the ordinary people call Parcas, whom, they say, know pity for none, but punish each man according to his deeds; that is they say that they control each mans fate (*wyrde*) [original citation of Alfred’s translation in Sedgfield (1899) pp. 102, 11. 29–31. The relevant passage of Boethius is in Stewart et al. (1918) p. 308]. Wittig adds, “Alfred could have known about the three fatal sisters who control men’s destiny from ... Isidore” who conflates the Eumenides with the Parcae (p. 172). In other words, one of the forces of *wyrd* in the Old English poetic vocabulary could have been a resonance of the classical idea of sudden, pitiless death (conventionally portrayed as feminine) with a traditional mythic idea of death in battle personified as *walcyrie*, collapsed into a singular, or perhaps collective, sense. Another sense, seen clearly in Alfred’s Boethius, is the idea of *wyrd* as denoting a person’s destiny, or the moment of his/her death. *Wyrd*, as will be discussed below, performed a number of linguistic roles, not all of which were gendered.

33. Bjork (1989) reprinted in R. M. Luizza (Ed.) (2000) *Old English Literature: Critical Essays*, New Haven: Yale, pp. 315–327.

34. “....The continental reforms of the mid 8th century to which Boniface was a party represent an increasing bid for ecclesiastical control of both the laity and monastic women; their transmission to England toward the end of Alfred’s reign and, more comprehensively, in the late 10th century, is reflected in an increasing misogyny and a decline in the legal status of women” (11). Stephanie Hollis (1993) *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church: Sharing a Common Fate*. Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell, p. 11.

35. Simon Keynes and Michael Lapidge (eds. and trans.) (1983), *Alfred the Great: Asser’s Life of King Alfred and other contemporary sources*, London: Penguin, p. 71.

36. Recounted in Keynes and Lapidge (1983), pp. 75–76.

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