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Abstract

This article provides a significant reinterpretation of *Wulf and Eadwacer*, departing from a new understanding of the function of the word *eadwacer* as an apt compound to refer to the Christian God. This is demonstrated through a survey of compounds that take *ead-* as their first element elsewhere in the Old English corpus, alongside a discussion of the possible pastoral implications of *wacer*. The concluding lines of the poem can, consequently, be understood more positively as a prayer of supplication on the part of the speaker, who repudiates her wretched relationship with the inconstant Wulf in favour of intimacy with God, providing the poem with a moment of consolation at its close, as is typical of the Old English elegies more generally. The article concludes with an extrapolation of the argument advanced up this point, in testing this soteriological reading's productivity in relation to *Wulf and Eadwacer*'s ambiguous opening lines.

In any article dedicated to *Wulf and Eadwacer*, it has practically reached the point of scholarly convention to acknowledge the extreme ambiguity of the poem and the diversity of critical responses it has spawned.¹ In terms of tone and form, the poem has traditionally been compared with both the Old English elegies and riddles, many of which also appear in the manuscript in which it is preserved, the Exeter Book (Exeter Cathedral Library MS 3501), although critics have also noted parallels in both the charms and a variety of Germanic legendary narratives.² Furthermore, alongside *Wulf and Eadwacer* having a greater number of potential 'solutions' than arguably any other Old English work, other scholars have been

¹ I am indebted to Heather O'Donoghue, Harriet Soper, Caroline Batten, and Rebecca Merkelbach for their support and comments on draft versions of this article, which were invaluable to it reaching its present form. I would also like to thank Rose Lyddon for the productive discussions of early-medieval theology in the early stages of the writing of this piece and Caitlin Kelly for her thoughtful reflections on the poem that first prompted my research direction in relation to the poem.

² C.f. John F. Adams, 'Wulf and Eadwacer: An Interpretation', *Modern Language Notes*, 73.1 (1958), 1–5; Donald K. Fry, 'Wulf and Eadwacer: A Wen Charm', *The Chaucer Review*, 5.4 (1971), 247–63; John M. Fanagan, 'Wulf and Eadwacer: A Solution to the Critic's Riddle', *Neophilologus*, 60 (1976), 130–37; Anne L. Klinck, 'The Old English Elegy as a Genre', *English Studies in Canada*, 10.2 (1984), 129–40; Joseph Harris, 'Hadubrand's Lament: On the Origin and Age of Elegy in Germanic', in *Heldensage und Heldendichtung im Germanischen*, ed. by Heinrich Beck (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1988), pp. 81–144 (pp. 95–101).

equally strident in their conviction that this poem lies beyond conclusive interpretation.³ These issues arise, not from the absolute obscurity of the poem to a modern reader, but rather from the fact that our basic understanding of the text, in which a feminine speaker expresses extreme distress in relation to her isolation, provides a strong foundation from which a multiplicity of readings can extend. Simultaneously, the specifics of the poem, beyond this basic affective sketch, remain sufficiently ambiguous to preclude a critical consensus on anything further. *Wulf and Eadwacer* may only ever remain evocative to the modern reader and care should be taken to approach the text with this in mind: this article does not seek to repudiate or supersede previous approaches to this short and much-dissected poem. At the outset, it should instead be acknowledged that substantial divergence in interpretation between critics can stem from relatively minor differences in their given presuppositions concerning the content and logic of the poem. Such a claim is not made at the beginning of this article for the purposes of self-deprecation: the ensuing argument aims to advance a wholly original and highly productive perspective on *Wulf and Eadwacer*, particularly in aligning the poem more closely with other Old English elegies than has previously been suggested. I do wish to foreground, however, that when faced with an interpretative challenge on the scale of *Wulf and Eadwacer*, the best approach is that of collaborative bricolage, within which the following work constitutes another piece to be added to the ever-expanding collage of scholarly response.

In this article, the principal point of distinction made in the interpretation of the poem lies in the understanding of the term *eadwacer*. The word appears only once in the poem and is most commonly taken as a proper noun denoting one of the principal characters of the work, who is regularly proposed to be the speaker's estranged husband, in opposition to her lover Wulf. Interpretations both complementary and alternative to the word's significance as a proper noun have also been suggested, principally centring on the term's potential significance as a compound. The most commonly accepted of these is the assertion that the word is best taken as meaning or having the subtext of 'property watcher', either as a critique of this possessive husband figure by the female speaker or as a form of mockery of Wulf who has abandoned the speaker, in opposition to his expected role as her protector.⁴ The less common interpretation, most notably suggested by Frese and Greenfield but more recently also supported, albeit as an implicit connotation of a proper name, by Osborn, is that of 'blessed guardian' or 'guardian of happiness'.⁵ For Greenfield, the term is simply one of affection for Wulf, but in Frese's argument, which centres on the radical reinterpretation of the poem as a mother's lament for a lost son, the term *eadwacer* refers to a guardian spirit to whom the grieving speaker appeals, although Frese is equivocal whether this is an angelic figure

³ See, by way of contrast, two notable treatments of the poem, the first offering a comprehensive and confident interpretation and the second stressing the irresolvable nature of the text's many issues: Stanley B. Greenfield, 'Wulf and Eadwacer: All Passions Pent', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 15 (1986), 5–14; Peter S. Baker, 'The Ambiguity of *Wulf and Eadwacer*', *Studies in Philology*, 78.5 (1981), 39–51.

⁴ See Adams, p. 1; Richard F. Giles, 'Wulf and Eadwacer: A New Reading', *Neophilologus*, 65 (1981), 468–72, (pp. 469–70); Terrence Keough, 'The Tension of Separation in *Wulf and Eadwacer*', *Neophilologische Mitteilungen*, 77.4 (1976), 552–60 (pp. 556–57); Peter Orton, 'An Approach to *Wulf and Eadwacer*', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy: Archaeology, Culture, History, Literature*, 85.3 (1985), 223–58 (p. 230).

⁵ Greenfield, 'All Passions Pent', p. 13; Dolores W. Frese, 'Wulf and Eadwacer: The Adulterous Woman Reconsidered', *Notre Dame English Journal*, 15.1 (1983), 1–22 (p. 14); Marijane Osborn, 'Reading the "Animals" of *Wulf and Eadwacer*', *Medievalia et humanistica: Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Culture*, 29 (2003), 27–49 (p. 39). Osborn views the superficial outlaw narrative as concealing a 'biblical animal allegory' relating to the Christian contact with the pagan, based on her reading of the text in relation to the works of Carolingian scholar Hrabanus Maurus.

or a being more akin to the valkyries of Old Norse myth. While a similar understanding of the literal meaning of *eadwacer* to Frese and Greenfield will be adopted here, their overarching interpretations of *Wulf and Eadwacer* will not be supported in this article, nor will their resulting suggestions as to the identity of the *eadwacer* figure, although both constitute coherent readings of the poem. Rather, I shall discuss the possibility and productivity of considering *eadwacer* as an epithet for the Christian God, to whom the speaker makes a direct appeal at the poem's conclusion.⁶ This investigation will begin with a systematic survey of the Old English corpus to establish a strong pattern of Christian significance in other compounds that take *ead* as their first component. This will be followed by the development of a distinct interpretation of the poem's conclusion, predicated on interpreting *eadwacer* as an epithet for God, wherein the speaker offers a prayer of supplication in relation to her miserable condition. Thirdly, a discussion of whether the highly ambiguous opening lines of the poem are compatible with the reading established up to that point in the article will be undertaken, to stress the impossibility of producing conclusive interpretative frameworks in relation to *Wulf and Eadwacer*.

Any such attempt to suggest a distinct alternative reading of a word central to the ambiguity of *Wulf and Eadwacer* must offer additional evidence to recommend it in comparison to more established interpretations. Fortunately, several novel arguments can be given to support the usage of *eadwacer* as a kenning for God. In the first place it is possible to significantly extend Frese's assertion that the term is 'an epithetic compound, the *ead* cognate with the well-attested *eadig* which commonly refers to the blessed or happy who enjoy the treasure or possession of Heaven.'⁷ A systematic analysis of compound words which take *ead* as their first element, throughout the extant corpus of Old English poetry and prose, reveals a semantic field overwhelmingly associated with Christian figures and values.⁸ By far the most common of these are the noun *ead-med* and the adjective *ead-mod*, occurring in the highest density, as one might expect, in the homiletic tradition.⁹ To this can be added *ead-wela*, which, while constructed from two words relating to wealth, is employed predominately in a religious context and which Stanley previously translated as 'blessings and prosperity'.¹⁰ The word *ead-hredig* also falls into this category; it is used

⁶ The only other instance in which *Eadwacer* has elsewhere possibly been argued to refer to the Christian God is potentially by Henry Morley in 1888, although Morley's argument is brief, allegorical, and obscure. It consequently shares no other features with the argument of the present article; for a summary and critique of Morley's approach to the poem, see Henry Bradley, review of Henry Morley and William Hall Griffin, *English Writers: An Attempt Towards a History of English Literature*, 11 vols (London: Cassell, 1887–95), vol. 2: *From Caedmon to the Conquest*, by Henry Morley (1888), in *The Academy*, 33 (1888), 197–98 (p. 198).

⁷ Frese, p. 14. For full discussion of the word's sense, see *Eadig* in *Dictionary of Old English: A to I*, ed. by Angus Cameron, Ashley Crandell Amos, Antonette diPaolo Healey et al. (Toronto: Dictionary of Old English Project, 2018), <[https://tapor.library.utoronto.ca/doe/](https://tapor.library.utoronto.ca/doecorpus/)> [accessed 11/04/2022].

⁸ See *Ead* in *Dictionary of Old English: A to I*. It is of note that the sense linked to prosperity is distinctly secondary to the more common meaning relating to happiness.

⁹ 'Humility' and 'Humble', respectively. *Eadmed* and *eadmod*, in *Dictionary of Old English Web Corpus*, ed. by Antonette diPaolo Healey with John Price Wilkin and Xin Xiang (Toronto: Dictionary of Old English Project, 2018), <<https://tapor.library.utoronto.ca/doecorpus/>> [accessed 25/04/2021].

¹⁰ *Andreas: An Edition*, ed. by Richard North and Michael Bintley (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016), p. 161; *Cynewulf's Elene*, ed. by Pamela Gradon (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1977), 75; *The Guthlac Poems of the Exeter Book*, ed. by Jane Roberts (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), p. 115; 'Exeter Book: *Paternal Precepts* — An Edition, with Translation, and Comments', ed. by Eric G. Stanley, *Anglia*, 136.2 (2018), 277–95 (p. 282); *The Exeter Anthology of Old English Poetry: An Edition of Exeter Dean and Chapter MS 3501*, ed. by Bernard J. Muir (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1994), p. 249.

only in the description of the three holy women Judith, Juliana, and Elene in their respective poems, often being idiomatically rendered as ‘triumphant.’¹¹ *Juliana* also features the phrase *ece eadlufan*, employed by Africanus while chastising Juliana for her unwillingness to marry Eleusius.¹² As Bjork has commented, however, this is one of the many examples within the poem where heathen rhetoric is undercut by an unwitting irony, as the audience is supposed to recognise that *ece eadlufan* can only be found with Christ.¹³ Such a reading is corroborated by the use of the phrase *ece eadgiefte*, by the demon in his confrontation with Juliana, as one of the attributes lost by Adam and Eve during the Fall.¹⁴ In all the cases above, it is significant to the ensuing argument to note that the presence of *ead* in these compounds has a consistent qualifying effect on the second element, in connoting the Christian spiritual quality of the compound as a whole, in contrast with the more general sense that the second component in isolation would confer. If *eadwacer* is intended to have a significance beyond that of a proper name, it would be highly unusual in the context of extant Old English poetry for *ead* to refer exclusively to secular wealth or property.

To the group of compounds discussed above can be added two yet more pertinent examples, which have not previously been considered in relation to *Wulf and Eadwacer*. The first is the phrase *engla eadgifa*, which occurs twice in *Andreas*, both times as a kenning for God.¹⁵ The second is the word *eadfruma*, found once in *Andreas* and once in *Christ B*.¹⁶ Depending on the meaning taken for *fruma* in this case, the compound can be translated as ‘the origin of joy’, ‘the author of joy’, or ‘prince of joy’, all of which are suitable given that the term is used of Christ upon his ascension to heaven to rule beside his Father. It is the argument of the present article that it is to this subset of compounds, beginning in *ead* and followed by a specific function or quality, that *eadwacer* should be considered to belong. In the cases of *fruma* and *gifa*, *ead*’s connotations of spiritual happiness reinforce the more subtle divine connotations of the second stems, which while all having metonymic relationships to the Christian God, also have possible laic interpretations in isolation. The application of such a model to *eadwacer* is complicated, however, by the fact that, while *fruma* and *gifa* are both attested in isolation elsewhere in the Old English corpus, *wacer* is not. This necessarily adds an additional level of speculation to the interpretation of this epithet, but the general critical consensus has been towards interpreting the term as relating to the verb *wacian*,¹⁷ and most closely, to the adjective *wacor*.¹⁸

It is worth noting here that *wacor* itself is a relatively uncommon word, having only five attestations. Two of these occurrences, along with the only two instances of the adverbial form *wacorlice*, are found in the Old English version of Gregory the Great’s *Pastoral Care*, as

¹¹ Literally ‘happy in victory’. See *Elene*, p. 58; *Juliana*, ed. by Rosemary Woolf (New York: Appleton, 1966), p. 32; *Judith*, in *The Cambridge Old English Reader*, ed. by Richard Marsden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 147–48. For discussions of how best to translate this term, see Patricia A. Belanoff, ‘Judith: Sacred and Secular Heroine’, *Studies in Medieval Culture*, 32 (1993), 247–64 (p. 249); Mary Dockray-Miller, ‘Female Community in the Old English *Judith*’, *Studia Neophilologica*, 70.2 (1998), 165–72 (p. 169).

¹² ‘The eternal joy of love’. *Juliana*, l. 25.

¹³ Robert E. Bjork, *Old English Verse Saints Lives* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), p. 57.

¹⁴ ‘The eternal gift of blessedness’. *Juliana*, l. 44.

¹⁵ ‘Bliss-giver of angels’. *Andreas*, ll. 121, 142.

¹⁶ *Andreas*, l. 187; *The Exeter Anthology of Old English Poetry*, p. 69.

¹⁷ ‘To remain awake’ or ‘to guard’.

¹⁸ ‘Watchful’ or ‘vigilant’. See Jacqueline A. Tasioulas, ‘The Mother’s Lament: *Wulf and Eadwacer* Reconsidered’, *Medium Ævum*, 65.1 (1996), 1–18 (p. 8); Fanagan, p. 132; Baker, ‘The Ambiguity of *Wulf and Eadwacer*’, p. 49.

translations of the Latin *vigilans*.¹⁹ The other three are found in the writings of Wulfstan, once in Homily 10c, *Her Ongynð be Cristendome*, and twice, albeit in two near-identical formulations, in *The Institutes of Polity*. It is productive at this juncture to detail the context of both of Wulfstan's usages of *wacor*. The homiletic example proceeds from an exhortation of *leofan men* to swiftly turn towards the observance of God.²⁰ At this point, Wulfstan constructs an extended contrast between the hoped-for shift from negative to positive qualities occasioned by an increase in piety, of which the following is an extract:

Se þe wære ofermod, weorðe se eadmod. Se þe wære scaðiende, weorðe se tiligende on rihtlicre tilðe. Se þe wære slapol, weorðe se ful wacor, se þe wære full slaw, weorðe se unslaw to cyrian gelome for agenre þearfe.²¹

Here the use of *wacor* in a metaphorical sense as an approbated Christian value, strikingly paralleled with an *ead-* compound, is clearly attested, with an implicit sense of spiritual attentiveness both towards God's law and against potential moral dangers. These connotations are expanded in *The Institutes of Polity*, wherein the following passage is found in Wulfstan's advice to bishops:

Forðam wace bið þe hyrde funden to heorde, þe nele þa heorde, þe he healdan sceal, huru mid clypunge bewerian, butan he elles mæge, gif þær hwylc þeodsceaþa sceapian onginneþ. Nis nan swa yfel sceapa, swa is deofol sylf. He bið áá ymbe þæt án hu he on manna sawlum mæst gesceapian mæge. Þonne motan þa hyrdas beon swiþe wacore and geornlice clypiende, þe wið þone þeodsceaðan folce scylan scyldan. Þæt syndon bisceopas and mæssepreostas, þe godcunde heorde gewarian and bewerian scylan mid wislican laran, þæt se wodfrea werewolf to swiðe ne toslite ne to fela ne abite of godcundre heorde.²²

Here the term *wacor* is employed as one of the central qualities of the spiritual *hyrde*: the pastor who must guard against the threat of the Devil, here depicted in lupine terms. No direct connection need be drawn between *Wulf and Eadwacer* and the later writing of Wulfstan for the comparison of the poem to this passage to remain productive in situating *wacor* within a lexical context of religious vigilance and an anti-social wolf-figure.²³ To reinforce this connection, it is possible to look at the usage of the closely related adjective *wacol* in Ælfric's *Sermo de Natale Domini*:²⁴ þam lareowe gedafenað þæt he symle wacol sy ofer godes eowede.

¹⁹ *King Alfred's Old English Translation of Pope Gregory the Great's Regula Pastoralis and its Cultural Context: A Study and Partial Edition According to all Surviving Manuscripts based on Cambridge, Corpus Christi College 12*, ed. by Carolin Schreiber (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2003), ll. 339, 377, 443, 590.

²⁰ *The Homilies of Wulfstan*, ed. by Dorothy Bethurum (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957), p. 206.

²¹ That one who was proud, may he become humble. That one who was stealing, may he toil in righteous labour. That one who was lethargic, may he become fully vigilant; that one who was slothful, may he become quick to reform for his own need.' *The Homilies of Wulfstan*, p. 207.

²² 'Consequently, the shepherd is found weak by the herd, who will not guard that which he should, not even to protect with a cry when he cannot do anything else, if any despoiler of the community begins to do harm there. None is so evil a criminal as is the Devil himself; he is always concerned about this: how he may do the most harm to men's souls. In that case, the shepherds must be very vigilant and cry out with all their power, those who must defend people against that despoiler of the community. Those are the bishops and mass-priests, who must warn and protect the godly herd with wise instruction, that the werewolf, mad with hunger, does not rend too widely, nor too much, nor devour any from the godly herd.' *Die Institutes of Polity, Civil and Ecclesiastical*, ed. by Karl Jost (Bern: Francke, 1959), pp. 69–71.

²³ This lexical similarity is also noted by Victoria Blud, who further draws attention to the parallel usages of *toslite* in both cases, as an action typical of wolves, see: 'Wolves' Heads and Wolves' Tales: Women and Exile in *Bisclavret* and *Wulf and Eadwacer*', *Exemplaria*, 26.4 (2014), 328–46 (pp. 338–39).

Ðæt se ungesewenenlica wulf godes shep ne tostence'.²⁴ If these attestations from the wider corpus are deemed pertinent and the close connection of *wacor* and *wacer* is accepted, we best understand *wacer* not in relation to neutral watchfulness but rather, more specifically, in the context of pastoral guardianship and alertness to the threat of sin, typically associated with the figure of the wolf. This is particularly the case if *wacer* is also taken to be an adjective, and consequently a side form of *wacor*, exhibiting the reduction of the unstressed vowel. When employed to form the second stem of *eadwacer*, it can, therefore, be taken as a substantive adjective to create an apposite epithet for God that could be interpreted along the lines of 'the one watchful over joy'. Such an interpretation is in keeping the stark contrast between wolf and shepherd that typifies the two figures to whom the speaker appeals within the poem.

A possible counter to the above argument, even if its tenets are accepted, is to reassert that as *eadwacer* is a personal name, such pastoral and spiritual connotations can only ever be secondary and latent. *Ead-* is a highly common constituent element to both masculine and feminine dithematic names in early medieval England and *eadwacer* itself is as attested as the name of: one or more moneyers in the late tenth and early eleventh century; a monk miraculously healed in Senatus Bravonius' late twelfth-century *The Life of St Oswald*; and two individuals mentioned in the Exeter manumissions dating to c. 1090.²⁵ In light of these extant attestations, it is reasonable to say that in relation to other Old English names with the *ead-* prefix, *eadwacer* appears infrequently and late in the record.²⁶ It is by no means definite that at the uncertain earlier historical point of the composition of *Wulf and Eadwacer*, the word would have had primary significance as a personal name. Furthermore, the potential function of an Old English compound as an individual's name does not necessitate its interpretation as such in all contexts, particularly when it appears in poetry. This is not merely an abstract assertion but can be corroborated with reference to the usage of *eadgife/eadgife* in the poem *Juliana*, as briefly mentioned above. The word appears three times in the poem, in each case referring to the gift of grace or happiness enjoyed by those favoured by God.²⁷ Yet the same word, *Eadgife/Eadgifu*, is also a popular early medieval English feminine name, with substantially more attestations than the uncommon *Eadwacer*.²⁸ There is no sense in *Juliana*, however, that *eadgife* loses any of its literal meaning as a compound with precise soteriological connotations, which clearly better fit its usage in this specific poetic context, despite its regular

²⁴ 'It is fitting for a teacher that he is continually vigilant over God's flock, that the invisible wolf does not destroy God's sheep.' *The Homilies of the Anglo-Saxon Church*, ed. by Benjamin Thorpe, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013) I, pp. 29–44 (p. 36). This parallel was originally noted in *The Political Writing of Archbishop Wulfstan of York*, ed. and trans. by Andrew Rabin (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), p. 109.

²⁵ 'Eadwacer', 1–3, Prosopography of Anglo-Saxon England, <<http://www.pase.ac.uk/http://www.pase.ac.uk>>[accessed 11.04.2022]; William G. Searle, *Onomasticon Anglo-Saxonicum: A List of Anglo-Saxon Proper Names from the Time of Beda to that of King John* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1897), p. 189; Frances Rose-Troup, 'Exeter Manumissions and Quittances of the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries', *Devonshire Association Transactions*, 64 (1937), 317–445 (p. 367).

²⁶ It is worth noting that in continental Europe, variants of the name Eadwacer (including Audovacar, Audovachrius, Odovacar, Odobacer, Odwaccar, and Odoacar) are attested as early as the fifth century: see Ernst Förstemann, *Altd deutsches Namenbuch*, 2 vols (Bonn: Hanstein, 1900–16), I, *Personennamen*, 2nd edn (1900), cols. 201–03. The extent to which such earlier attestations of the name elsewhere in Europe might have informed the original composition of the poem is hard to ascertain, although by the point of the tenth-century compilation of the Exeter Book, it seems unlikely that these parallels would have been primary to a reader of the poem in Old English.

²⁷ *Juliana*, ll. 33, 44, 48.

²⁸ Searle, pp. 180–81.

employment elsewhere as an appellation. So too, the infrequent use of *eadwacer* elsewhere as a personal name does not necessitate its primary poetic usage in *Wulf and Eadwacer* in this manner. Rather all interpretations should be tested as to their literary suitability and the productivity of the readings of the poem they catalyse.

Furthermore, the fact that *eadwacer* is used in the verb phrase *gehyrest þu*, a construction of direct address, by no means disqualifies it from being considered as a sobriquet for God. Indeed Osborn, in her convincing challenge to *gehyrest þu* being dismissive or hostile in tone, notes that the phrase is repeatedly used, in its contracted form of *georstu*, in the Vespasian Psalter as a translation of the exclamatory *O* in the Latin phrase *O Domine*.²⁹ In light of the argument advanced in this article, this association takes on further significance, as it can now reasonably be postulated that the formulation *gehyrest þu eadwacer* can be taken as a complete vernacular exclamation to God, with all the components having precedents or parallels elsewhere in the Old English corpus to support their usage in this manner. It is also fruitful to consider the densely referential quality of *wulf*, the other word commonly interpreted as a personal name in the poem. Here the range of possible meanings are more apparent, as is the play between them: in the most immediate sense trading on *wulf* as both a feared predator and a masculine name, but the word also has secondary associations with outlawry and Satan.³⁰ While the name *Wulf* itself was common throughout Germanic-speaking regions and did not have *de facto* negative connotations, the repeated usage of bestial language in the poem produces a subtextual characterisation of the masculine human figure who shares the lupine name through a web of negative animalistic and moral qualities.³¹ In a more oblique manner, a similar interrelationship can be seen to exist here between the potential understandings of *eadwacer* as a man's personal name and as a kenning for God. It would be more in keeping with previous scholarship to read the relationship of these two senses as denoting a man whose role as the speaker's husband is implicitly approbated by the spiritual connotations of the name; I wish to make the case in the next section of this article, conversely, for the interpretative utility of considering *eadwacer* as referring primarily to God, with the word's simultaneous function as an uncommon Old English masculine name specifying the feminine speaker's relationship with the Lord as personal and intimate in a manner akin to a wife's relationship with her husband.

Sponsa Lupi, Sponsa Christi

With an argument for the interpretation of *eadwacer* as referring to God established, the potential for the productive reinterpretation of *Wulf and Eadwacer* based on such a reading may be tested. Most crucially, it provides an attractive rationale for the presence of a sudden appeal to a second named figure late in the poem, which, prior to this, appears to have otherwise been closely focused on the speaker's relationship with *Wulf* alone. To understand *Eadwacer* as another man familiar to the speaker and distinct from *Wulf* necessitates an

²⁹ Osborn, p. 34.

³⁰ See Sonja Daniëlli, 'Wulf, Min Wulf: An Eclectic Analysis of the Wolf-Man', *Neophilologus*, 90 (2006), 135–54; Anne L. Klinck, 'Animal Imagery in *Wulf and Eadwacer* and the Possibilities of Interpretation', *Papers on Language and Literature*, 23.1 (1987), 4–13; Jean Abbott, 'Naming and Un-Naming in Old English Literature' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Stanford Univ., 2020), pp. 141–44.

³¹ See Eric G. Stanley, 'Wolf, My Wolf!', in *Old English and New: Studies in Language and Linguistics in Honor of Frederic G. Cassidy*, ed. by Joan H. Hall, Nick Doane and Dick Ringler (New York: Garland, 1992), pp. 46–62.

explanation of the tripartite relationship of the three characters, with the suggestion of the speaker being married to *Eadwacer* but conducting an adulterous relationship with *Wulf* being the most common hypothesis since Bradley initially proposed this love-triangle interpretation in 1888.³² Any argument for the speaker being involved in multiple relationships necessarily extends from the initial reading of *eadwacer* as a personal name, however, as outside of the twin appeals of *wulf*, *min wulf* and *gehyrest þu eadwacer*, no other lines in the poem conclusively demonstrate that the speaker engages with two distinct individuals. The specific charge of adultery seems largely unsupported in the remainder of the poem, although several critics have read lines 9–12 of the poem as suggesting the speaker’s relationship with two men:

Wulfes ic mines widlastum wenum dogode,
 þonne hit wæs renig weder ond ic reotugu sæt,
 þonne mec se beaducafa bogum bilegde,
 wæs me wyn to þon, wæs me hwæpre eac
 lað.³³

The contention that two figures interact with the speaker hinges on the interpretation of *se beaducafa*, ‘the battle-bold one’, as a reference to *eadwacer*, who is the figure who embraces the speaker while *Wulf* is upon his *widlastas*. The unclear syntax of these four lines, however, means that this is by no means the only possible reading; indeed, straightforward and suitable readings can be supplied that take all four of these lines as referring to *Wulf*. One such explanation, that accounts for the speaker’s *wen* in relationship to *Wulf*’s wanderings, is that these *widlastas*, being in unspecified directions, have the potential to return *Wulf* to the speaker but also to prolong their separation. The emotionally painful results of both *Wulf*’s absence and presence to the speaker are then paralleled in the dual constructions beginning with *þonne*, with line 10 detailing her grief in isolation, and lines 11 and 12 depicting her conflicted feelings concerning their physical intimacy, which intermingles pleasure and sorrow. In this interpretation, there is no need to supply a figure other than *Wulf* to interact with the speaker to make sense of the minimal action described in the poem.³⁴ The presence of another figure is only necessitated in lines 9–12, tautologically, by the interpretation of *eadwacer* as a man addressed by the speaker, whose appearance must be retroactively incorporated into the preceding material.

If, conversely, *Wulf* is taken to be the only figure with whom the speaker is engaged in a physical, romantic relationship in the poem and *eadwacer* is understood as a compound for God, as argued for in the first section of this article, then a general reading of the poem can be offered that is apposite to both the tone and content of Old English elegiac poetry. Crucially, the interpretation offered below does not reduce the poem to a religious allegory

³² Bradley, p. 98.

³³ ‘I endured in expectation through my *Wulf*’s wide travels. When it was rainy weather and I sat mournful, when the battle-bold one locked me in his arms: There was joy for me to a point, but there was also pain for me.’ The hapax legomenon *dogode* is commonly amended to *hogode* to avoid a further complication in interpreting the poem in having to suggest a meaning for this unknown word: Baker, pp. 46–47. A number of scholars have noted that *dogode* fits neatly into the bestial lexical field that runs throughout the poem and the most suitable suggested definitions tend towards understanding the word along the lines of ‘to suffer’ or ‘to bear’: see Ruth P. M. Lehmann, ‘The Metrics and Structure of *Wulf and Eadwacer*’, *Philological Quarterly*, 48.2 (1969), 155–65 (pp. 161–62); Klinck, ‘Animal Imagery in *Wulf and Eadwacer*’, pp. 8–9; Marijane Osborn, ‘Dogode in *Wulf and Eadwacer* and King Alfred’s Hunting Metaphors’, *ANQ: A Quarterly Journal of Short Articles, Notes and Reviews*, 13.4 (2000), 3–9.

³⁴ Stanley B. Greenfield, *Hero and Exile: The Art of Old English Poetry* (London: Bloomsbury, 1989), pp. 189–90.

of the relationship between Christ and Church, for example, but nor does it entirely revoke the potential for a Christian significance as central to the poem, in favour of speculation as to uncertain Germanic legendary allusions.³⁵ The woman who is the speaker of the poem is in some way romantically attached to *Wulf*, an antisocial and reviled figure, whose hostile relationship with the unspecified community to which the speaker belongs factors into their separation from one another. The speaker's relationship with *Wulf* also informs her own self-identification as a figure likewise outcast from her society, albeit perhaps only on a mental level, with her shared alterity with *Wulf* suggested by the repetition of the near identical lines *ungelic is us/ungelice is us*, the former being an adjectival construction and the latter adverbial.³⁶ The poem is suffused with not only the speaker's painful longing for *Wulf* but, simultaneously, her sorrowful awareness of the dangers, both physical and moral, of sustained intimacy between them. She is trapped, therefore, in a state of abject isolation and the poem functions initially as a lament for her tortuously conflicted position. The speaker is abstracted from romantic and sexual joy as epitomised by her desire for *Wulf*, which correlates with the general stress on the ephemeral nature of the pleasures of the profane world in Old English elegiac poetry. Crucially, however, she is also unable to create the necessary emotional detachment from both her sorrow and her desire to enter into the types of productive spiritual reflection achieved by other dispossessed or vagrant figures elsewhere in the elegies. It is useful to consider the speaker's position in relation to the contrasting benefits and perils of an eremitic lifestyle, as depicted in the counsels of the angel and devil to St Guthlac in *Guthlac A*:

oþer him þas eorþan ealle sægde
 læne under lyfte & þa longan gód
 herede on heofonum þær haligra
 salwa gesittað in sigorwuldre
 dryhtnes dreamas— he him dæda lean
 georne gieldeð þam þe his giefe willað
 þicgan to þonce & him þas woruld
 uttor lætan þonne þæt ece líf;
 oþer hyne scyhte þæt he sceaðena gemot
 nihtes sohte & þurh neþinge
 wunne æfter worulde swa doð wræcmæccas
 þa þe ne bimurnað monnes feore
 þæs þe him to honda huþe gelædeð
 butan hy þy reafe rædan
 motan.³⁷

³⁵ Erin Sebo, 'Identifying the Narrator of *Wulf and Eadwacer*? Signy, the Heroides and the Adaptation of Classical Models in Old English Literature', *Neophilologus*, 105 (2021), 109–22.

³⁶ 'It is different for us'. For further discussion of the gendered quality of exile experienced by women in Old English poetry, see Helen T. Bennett, 'Exile and the Semiosis of Gender in Old English Elegies', in *Class and Gender in Early English Literature: Intersections*, ed. by Britton J. Harwood and Gillian R. Overing (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), pp. 43–58 (pp. 45–46). For analysis of the interpretative problems associated with *ungelic* and *ungelice* and why 'different' is a productive translation, see Carole Hough, '*Wulf and Eadwacer*: A note on *Ungelic*', *ANQ: A Quarterly Journal of Short Articles, Notes and Reviews*, 8.3 (1995), 3–6.

³⁷ 'One said to him that all of this earth under the heavens is transitory and praised those extensive benefits in heaven, where holy souls sit in the glory of victory and joy of the Lord – he readily renders rewards to them for their deeds, those who want to accept his grace with pleasure and altogether abandon this world instead of that eternal life. The other said that he should seek a gathering of criminals in the night and through recklessness struggle for

The speaker of *Wulf and Eadwacer* may be self-styled outcast rather than an *eardstapa* proper, but her relationship with *Wulf*, a reviled outsider to her community, has moved her closer to the debased moral state advocated for by the demon in the passage from *Guthlac A* above, as she seeks reckless pleasure in the company of an antisocial figure. As befitting a *Frauenlied*, sexual desire for an inconstant man is depicted as a feminine mode of exploring the key elegiac tenet of the simultaneous allure and fallibility of secular relationships,³⁸ in a manner that parallels the melancholy depictions of the masculine bond between lord and retainer in poems such as *Deor*. A central element of the artistry of *Wulf and Eadwacer*, however, is that the text never descends to extradiegetic moral condemnation of the speaker's non-normative relationships to both her lover and her community, instead remaining tightly trained on her own sorrowful awareness of the forlorn nature of her abandonment.

This affect-centred reading of the central relationship between the speaker and *Wulf* already conforms with the poem having an elegiac tone, in focusing on an agonised response to transitory pleasure, but the reading of *eadwacer* proposed in the first section of this article allows for an interpretation of *Wulf and Eadwacer* that incorporates another key component of Old English elegies: the anticipation of divine consolation to compensate for profane sorrow.³⁹ Poems such as *The Wanderer*, *The Seafarer*, and, less distinctly, *The Wife's Lament* all feature extensive melancholic reflections on the fleeting nature of earthly comforts, qualified by an assertion of the comfort offered by the favour of God serving as a conclusion to the poem.⁴⁰ I suggest that the final section of *Wulf and Eadwacer* fulfils a similar purpose, which allows the poem to be understood as a more conventional member of the elegiac corpus. In the light of the argument made above, the lines in question can be understood as follows:

Gehyrest þu, eadwacer? Uncerne earne hwelp
 wulf tō wuda.
 Pæt mon ēaþe tōsliteð þætte næfre gesomnad wæs,
 uncer giedd geador.⁴¹

These final lines of the poem can be taken together as a prayer of supplication in 'entreating God either directly or through the meditation on the saint(s) in order to be released from danger' and which the speaker offers to her deity in relation to the plight she has previously

worldly pleasures, such as wretches do, those who never care for a person's life, the one who brings plunder into their hands, as long as they may deprive them of loot.' *The Guthlac Poems*, ll. 86–87. For a study that draws a comparable parallel between the *Guthlac* poems and *Wulf and Eadwacer*, albeit mediated through the figure of St Bertellin, see Lindy Brady, 'An Analogue to *Wulf and Eadwacer* in the life of St Bertellin of Stafford,' *The Review of English Studies*, 67.278 (2016), 1–20 (p. 19).

³⁸ Kemp Malone, 'Two English *Frauenlieder*', *Comparative Literature*, 14.1 (1962), 106–17 (pp. 107–11).

³⁹ Stanley B. Greenfield, 'The Old English Elegies', in *Continuations and Beginnings: Studies in Old English Literature*, ed. by Eric G. Stanley (London: Nelson. 1966), pp. 142–75 (p. 143).

⁴⁰ Ida L. Gordon, 'Traditional Themes in The Wanderer and The Seafarer', *The Review of English Studies*, 5.17 (1954), 1–13 (p. 6); John D. Niles, 'The Problem of the Ending of the Wife's "Lament"', *Speculum*, 78.4 (2003), 1107–50 (pp. 1141–50).

⁴¹ 'Do you hear, one watchful over joy? Our wretched whelp, Wulf bears to the wood. That is easily torn asunder, which was never joined, our song together.' The preservation of the literal word order in this translation highlights the difficulty of interpreting the referents of the dual possessive pronoun *uncerne*, with the proximity of *eadwacer* in the previous clause making it a possible candidate alongside *wulf* as the nominative noun of the clause in which the pronoun appears. The balancing of the pronoun between the two appellations is perhaps intentionally ambiguous as to which figure the speaker is referring, although it seems more likely, although by no means certain, that the proximity of *wulf* and *whelp* at the end of the clause stresses their mutual relationship with the speaker.

lamented.⁴² Following the moment of epiclesis in *Gehyrest þu eadwacer*, the speaker describes the crisis-point of absolute alienation between her and Wulf when he, reduced to his most animalistic and predatory state as the father of a *hwelp*, flees with their child into the woods. There has been some critical debate as to whether the child in question, previously unmentioned in the poem, is an actual figure within the narrative or a metaphor relating to the relationship of the speaker and Wulf.⁴³ In either case, the father's flight with the child, a figure who, whether real or constructed, would have been understood as signifying the productive aspects of their relationship, signals the irreparable collapse of an intimacy previously balanced between desire and sorrow. If we are to take it that the child was raised by the speaker, rather than the hunted Wulf, then we could add to this that the separation of child and mother removes the central, persistent reminder of affection and commitment that remained between the two estranged figures, although this arrangement is by no means certain. If the emendation of the hapax *earne* to *eargne* is accepted to provide a convincing and attractive simplification of this line, then a further sense of the speaker's highly negative conception of her own child as the vile product of a failed relationship is provided.⁴⁴ Regardless, the next line adds a certain tone of finality to this departure by Wulf, with the bestial connotations of *tosliteð* making it an apposite term to encapsulate the violent and visceral quality of this separation.

Several critics have commented that the penultimate line of the poem appears to function as an inversion of Matthew 19:6: *Quod ergo Deus coniunxit, homo non sepatet*.⁴⁵ For most critics besides Spamer, this biblical resonance has proved largely incidental to their readings of the wider poem, but in the present interpretation, the line gains significance as an emphatic break from the established action and mood, in which the speaker has agonised between desire and despair. Following the speaker's desperate address of God and her outlining of her present plight in relation to *Wulf's* dramatic severance of their relationship, this inversion of Christ's own pronouncement on the immorality of divorce in the Gospel of Matthew stands at the heart of her moment of supplication that concludes the poem. The speaker appeals to God as the only figure capable of granting her emotional and spiritual separation from *Wulf* to match her physical condition following her desertion. This entreaty amounts to a prayer for the annulment of their relationship, a request that can be easily granted as, by the speaker's logic, their union is invalid. The exact logic of this declaration of the relationship as void can be debated: if *Wulf* and the speaker are in a dysfunctional marriage, this could be a request for permission to self-divorce due to both desertion and the criminal nature of the spouse. Otherwise it may function as a broader entreaty for spiritual closure on the immorality of unmarried intimacy.⁴⁶ Legal specificity is not the objective of these lines, however, but

⁴² Godefridus J. C. Snoek, *Medieval Piety from Relics to the Eucharist: A Process of Mutual Interaction* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), p. 173. For further discussion of the prominence of supplication as a mode of communication with God in early medieval Europe, see Geoffrey Koziol, *Begging Pardon and Favor: Ritual and Political Order in Early Medieval France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), pp. 8–19.

⁴³ Fanagan, p. 135; Frese, p. 9.

⁴⁴ Baker, p. 50.

⁴⁵ 'Thus what God has joined together, let no man separate'. See James B. Spamer, 'The Marriage Concept in *Wulf and Eadwacer*', *Neophilologus*, 62.1 (1978), 143–44.

⁴⁶ Both annulment and divorce are commonly attested as methods of exiting dysfunctional relationships in early medieval England, although the exact mechanisms by which a wife could leave her husband and the consistency of this practice across the period are contested; see Theodore J. Rivers, 'Adultery in Early Anglo-Saxon Society: Æthelberht 31 in Comparison with Continental Germanic Law', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 20 (1991), 19–25; Carole A. Hough, 'The Early Kentish "Divorce Laws": A Reconsideration of Æthelberht, chs. 79 and 80', *Anglo-Saxon*

rather the conveyance of a moral repudiation of both sin and future temptation on the part of the speaker, by stressing her desire to sever her emotional connections with her lover. This imploration for separation concludes the poem and the relationship, both of which are linked by the speaker through the term *giedd*, with this unification of lyric and love life supporting the contention that the speaker conceives of the final four lines of the poem as being invested with perlocutionary force, as would be expected of a prayer of supplication.⁴⁷

This, at last, leads to a reading of *Wulf and Eadwacer* that allows for the presence of elegiac consolation at the poem's close, which modifies and potentially supersedes the speaker's intense distress that has otherwise typified this short work. The speaker presents herself for the majority of the poem as almost wholly defined by her tortured relationship to *Wulf*, a dangerous and undependable figure. While care should be taken to not reduce the speaker's relationship to an allegorical level, a moral element clearly exists in the image of the speaker as the bride of the wolf, a figure deprived of community, happiness, and potentially salvation through intimacy with an outcast or demonic figure. It seems no coincidence, in addition, that *eadwacer's* strong pastoral connotations means that the poem's central character is caught between figures associated with both the wolf and the shepherd, heightening the sense that a salvific struggle underlies her romantic woes. The speaker, in the desperation triggered by her abandonment, repudiates her relationship with *Wulf* and proclaims its invalidity before God. As touched upon in the previous section, by invoking God with a name that can also be understood as a masculine personal name, it is possible that the speaker is envisioning her relationship with her deity as that of wife and husband. This aligns with the wider *sponsa Christi* motif, regularly utilised as an approbated mode of piety for medieval women, but here the contrast between this form of feminine Christian devotion and the flawed nature of human relationships is stressed by the absolute degradation experienced by the speaker throughout the course of the poem.⁴⁸ To return to the moral dichotomy offered to those outcast from society presented in *Guthlac A*, as discussed above, in the reading offered in this article, the poem

England, 23 (1994), 19–34; Katherine Bullimore, 'Unpicking the Web: The Divorce of Ecgrif and Æthelthryth', *European Review of History*, 16.6 (2009), 835–54; Elizabeth Van Houts, *Married Life in the Middle Ages, 900–1300* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 141–68. It should be noted that the contemporary law codes are primarily concerned with the dissolution of a marriage on the grounds of adultery, with divorce by a woman on the specific grounds suggested above not having a direct correlate in extant early medieval English legal or ecclesiastical evidence. It is perhaps more productive, however, in light of the theme of abandonment that pervades *Wulf and Eadwacer*, to consider these lines in relation to the less formal unions to lower-status wives conducted by the English kings of the period who engaged in serial marriages, relationships which are understood only reductively by the term 'concubinage': Sara McDougall, *Royal Bastards: The Birth of Illegitimacy 800–1230* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 108–15. Such women could be comparatively easily deserted in favour of a more promising match due to the slight legal protections they received, irrespective of the significance attached to the relationship by said women and their families, Ruth M. Karras, *Unmarriages: Women, Men, and Sexual Unions in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), pp. 38–45, 68–73; Ryan T. Goodman, '“In a Father's Place”: Anglo-Saxon Kingship and Masculinity in the Long Tenth Century' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Univ. of Manchester, 2018), pp. 182–87. No specific royal parallel need be suggested to read *Wulf and Eadwacer* as a protest at a comparable practice of informal romantic union followed by desertion, in the voice of the victim herself.

⁴⁷ For a wider discussion of the utility of applying speech act theory to the construction of intercessory prayer, see Steven Mann, 'Ask and You Shall Intercede: The Peculiar Perlocutionary Power of Asking God Questions', *Bulletin for Biblical Research*, 29.2 (2019), 208–24.

⁴⁸ This argument extends from the concept that the use of *sponsa Christi* imagery stresses the contrast between the holy woman and her sinful enemies in Hugh Magennis, 'Occurrences of Nuptial Imagery in Old English Hagiographical Texts', *English Language Notes*, 33.4 (1996), 1–9. See also Philip Pulsiano, 'Blessed Bodies: The Vitae of Anglo-Saxon Female Saints', *Parergon*, 16.2 (1999), 1–42 (pp. 25–6, 32–4).

concludes with the speaker dedicating herself fully to God by renouncing her last attachment to the secular world and entering a state of pious, perfected seclusion. If the poem's final lines are read as a prayer of supplication, then it is tempting to imagine it as one that precedes the speaker's dedication to something akin to the lifestyle of an anchorite, as one who achieves intimacy with God in isolation.⁴⁹

Lord of Hosts, Lord Against the Host

The above reading has a number of features that recommend it as a productive means of approaching *Wulf and Eadwacer*. In the first place, it simplifies the system of relationships necessary to make sense of the poem's action in removing the need to postulate an adulterous love triangle between the speakers and two men, while nevertheless maintaining romantic love as a central theme of the poem. It may seem no more straightforward to produce an interpretation that instead advocates for a moral contrast between two lords, one secular and one divine, but this reading ultimately provides a more conventionally elegiac structure to the poem. The bulk of the poem is devoted to the depiction of earthly sorrows, encapsulated by both the presence and absence of *Wulf*, while the final lines suggest the possibility of heavenly consolation through intimacy with God. This, in turn, allows us to develop a more complex emotional portrait of the speaker beyond her previous characterisation as an adulterer lamenting her miserable plight; the speaker conveys frank sexual desire, anguish in relation to her abandonment, and, most radically, hope as to her deliverance from her wretched situation. Such a reading also introduces a number of artful symmetries into the poem, most notably in the twin cries of *Wulf*, *min Wulf* and *Gehyrest þu, eadwacer*. Both cries to masculine protectors are depicted as agonised exclamations, but the emotional trajectories that extend from them are in clear contrast: the cry for *Wulf* builds towards the speaker's realisation of her abandonment, the cry to God towards her desire for absolution.

As mentioned at this article's outset, however, no single interpretation of *Wulf and Eadwacer* has satisfactorily accounted for the full range of ambiguities present in the poem, nor been able to refute possible alternative readings that place primary importance on other allusions generated by engagement with the poem. It is important, therefore, to also consider the elements of the poem that prove resistant to a given interpretative model as qualifiers on the conclusions that can be drawn concerning this obscure text. While the above reading proves highly productive in approaching lines 9–19 of the poem, lines 1–8 still contain a number of issues that make them more difficult to incorporate into a reading centred on a contrast between secular and spiritual husbands. Lines 4–5 are perhaps the most straightforward, establishing the inescapable isolation of the speaker and the irresolvable absence of *Wulf*. The presence of the *wælreowe* figures who accompany the speaker on the island on which she resides is more complex; on a basic level, the violent capability of these individuals suggests *Wulf*'s enmity with the community within which the speaker resides, although the

⁴⁹ The practice of a range of anchoritic traditions, of differing degrees of asceticism, by women in early medieval England is well attested and women opting to retire into seclusion would have been considered an approbated expression of feminine piety: see Patricia A. Halpin, 'The Religious Experience of Women in Anglo-Saxon England' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Boston College, 2000), pp. 29–36. For the suitability of reading both *Wulf and Eadwacer* and *The Wife's Lament* in relation to the 'monastic ideology' of feminine enclosure, see Shari Horner, *The Discourse of Enclosure: Representing Women in Old English Literature* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001), pp. 42–55.

highly negative connotations of the word do complicate the potential to see the poem as having a straightforward moral dimension by introducing a degree of sympathy for the hunted Wulf. A possible remedy for this issue is to suggest that the speaker's fearful description of those who reside alongside her on the island further implies her status as an outcast by establishing emotional distance between her and the community who surround her: these men are not presented as her guardians in a manner that would stand in parallel to the use of *eadwacer* later in the poem, but rather cruel figures motivated by a desire for violence rather than the safeguarding of the speaker. This in turn aligns them more closely with the predatory *Wulf* than the Christian God, stressing that the terrestrial world is exclusively populated by dangerous male presences. No masculine figure exists on earth, therefore, be they intracommunal or extracommunal, who can offer intimacy and care to the speaker, which correlates with her turn to spiritual comfort granted by a divine male ruler later in the poem.

Far more issues arise in how best to understand lines 1–2 of the poem, with line 2 repeated at line 7. The lines in question read: *Leodum is minum swylce him mon lac gife | willað hy hine aþecgan gif he on þreat cymeð*. The exact sense of these lines is obscured by both the significant interpretative difficulties in the vocabulary being used and uncertainty as to whom the pronouns in this line are referring to, as there is no preceding extant verse to clarify the actors. The translation of the first line is somewhat more straightforward, principally resting on how best to translate *lac*, with 'gift', 'offering', and 'sacrifice' all being potential candidates.⁵⁰ The sense of the second line is more unclear, with both *aþecgan* and *þreat* proving resistant to prior critical interpretation. *Aþecgan* is attested only once elsewhere in Old English, in a medical recipe in which it either has the sense of 'to give' or 'to consume'.⁵¹ This links to the looser connection the verb probably has with the more common *þecgan*, which often has a sense of taking food, leading by extension to the two dichotomous suggested translations of *aþecgan* as 'to receive' (as in to serve food) and 'to destroy' (as in to consume food).⁵² While a number of more speculative suggestions have been offered have been offered for *þreat*, Klinck's defence of the well-attested basic sense of 'host' or 'troop' provides the most attractive and likely solution.⁵³ With these issues foregrounded, a potential reading of these lines can be offered that aligns with the wider interpretation previously advanced in this article and which plays upon the uncertainty of these lines to poetic effect, in establishing a contrast between the two lords with whom the speaker interacts within the poem, the secular *Wulf* and the sacred *eadwacer*. An important caveat to the following analysis, beyond those already proffered at the outset of this article, is that it relies to an extent on the uncertainty regarding the potential multiplicity of meanings of the words *lac*, *aþecgan*, and *þreat* being an original feature of the poem rather than the product of an obscuration of its sense to the modern critic.⁵⁴ There are good reasons to consider this as a possibility, however, both due to the

⁵⁰ Lehmann, p. 157; Baker, p. 40–41.

⁵¹ Baker, p. 43.

⁵² Klinck, 'Animal Imagery in *Wulf and Eadwacer*', pp. 5–6; Patricia Belanoff, 'Ides... *geomrode giddum*: The Old English Female Lament', in *Medieval Woman's Song: Cross-Cultural Approaches*, ed. by Anne L. Klinck and Ann M. Rasmussen (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), pp. 29–46 (p. 40).

⁵³ Klinck, 'Animal Imagery in *Wulf and Eadwacer*', pp. 6–7. Klinck further notes that *þreat* may alternatively have its abstract sense of 'violence' in this context, with its accusative form necessitating a translation along the lines of 'come upon violence.' This possibility remains compatible with the wider interpretation of these lines offered in this article.

⁵⁴ This article is not alone in viewing the multiple senses of these ambiguous words as complementary rather than conflicting and potentially constituting an element of the poem's artistry: see Belanoff, 'Ides... *geomrode giddum*',

potential riddling quality of the poem and due to the repetition of the formulation in line 2 at line 7 in what appears to be a substantially different context.

In the first two lines of the poem, the figure referred to by masculine singular pronouns is almost universally taken to be Wulf; in light of the interpretation previously offered in this article and the fact that *Wulf* appears to be more emphatically introduced in line 4, the possibility will be explored that the use of the masculine singular pronoun prior to the introduction of any others figures in the poem can be understood as a reference to Christ. Such a reading rests on the double nature of Christ and his Messianic sacrifice in relation to mankind, with the hostility and the violence of the crucifixion necessarily coexisting alongside the gift of salvation inherent in Christ's death. The use of the plural *leodum* suggests a large and non-specific body of people to which the speaker is affiliated, all of whom receive a *lac* from a singular masculine unnamed figure. The failure to clarify the nature of both the individual and the collective in the first line of the poem may suggest the universality of the image in question or, at least, direct the medieval Christian reader to consider the broadest applications in which the offering of a sacrifice by one for many can be understood, of which Christ's sacrifice on the cross for mankind would appear a prime candidate. The multiple senses of *lac* are productive in encapsulating the crucifixion as a moment of both the sacrifice of Christ on the part of mankind and a gift to mankind on the part of Christ, and the word is, consequently, attested elsewhere in the Old English corpus in relation to the crucifixion. In the prose life of St Andrew, for instance, a clear understanding is demonstrated of the senses of spiritual sacrifice and physical gift or offering both being contained within the word *lac*:

Egeas sæde, "Buton ðu offrige lác urum ælmihtigum godum, on ðære ylcan rode ðe ðu herast ic ðe hate gewæhtne afæstnian." Andreas him cwæð to, "Dæghwomlice ic offrige mine lác ðam Ælmihtigan Gode, seðe ana is soð God. Na hlowendra fearra flæsc, oððe buccena blód, ac ic offrige dæghwomlice on weofode pære halgan rode þæt ungewemmede lamb, and hit ðurhwunað ansund and cucu syððan eal folc his flæsc et, and his blód drincð."⁵⁵

St. Andrew's reference to partaking in the sacrifice of Christ daily on the altar is most likely a description of the ritual of the Eucharist, which in an early medieval context was commonly understood as 'a sacrifice commemorating and re-presenting Christ's sacrifice and death on the cross.'⁵⁶ This connection has the potential to clarify line 2 of *Wulf and Eadwacer*, particularly in relation to the complex sense of *apecgan*. As mentioned above, the literal root of the word appears to be connected to the physical act of consumption and the reading provided here stays truer to this sense than previous metaphorical suggestions of destruction or service, if we take it as a reference to the sacrament of eating and drinking of the body and blood of Christ. This interpretation is made more fruitful by the fact that the potential additional senses of *apecgan* discussed by other critics, 'to receive' and 'to destroy', are both

pp. 39–41.

⁵⁵ Egeas said: "Unless you offer a sacrifice to our almighty gods, I will order you to be fastened and tormented on the same cross that you worship." Andreas said to him: "I daily offer my sacrifice to the Almighty God, who alone is the true God. Neither the meat of lowing bulls nor the blood of he-goats, instead I offer daily on the altar of the holy cross that immaculate lamb and it endures living and unharmed after all people eat its flesh and drink its blood." *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: The First Series*, ed. by Peter Clemoes, Early English Text Society 17 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 583.

⁵⁶ Celia Chazelle, 'The Eucharist in Early Medieval Europe', in *A Companion to the Eucharist in the Middle Ages*, ed. by Ian Levy, Gary Macy, and Kristen Van Ausdall, Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition 26 (Leiden: Brill, 2011), pp. 205–49 (p. 227).

compatible with the complex ritual significance of the Eucharist, which perhaps uniquely, can simultaneously accommodate these two meanings that would elsewhere be contradictory.

The end of line 2, *gif hē on prēat cymeð*, is similar to the preceding line in having the figure identified only by a masculine pronoun interacting with the indistinct collective body of people constituting the *prēat*, taken here, as mentioned above, to have the general sense of ‘host’ or ‘crowd’. The lack of specificity in this formulation at the outset of the poem again suggests that obfuscation and generality may be central features within the construction of the opening lines. If this absence of clarity is taken, at least at the poem’s outset, to have a riddling quality in compelling the reader to apply their own experience to resolve obscure verse, it does not seem an overextension to connect these features to the mysticism and universalism that constitute theological properties of the eucharistic sacrament, particularly in the context of the prevalence of Christian poetry within the Exeter Book. This brings us to a basic translation of the first two lines of ‘It is to my people as if someone gave them a gift/sacrifice, they will consume him if he comes into the host’. If, as argued above, this is a reference to the Holy Communion, then the third line, *ungelic is us* ‘it is different for us’, signals that the speaker and Wulf are more precisely *spiritual* outcasts, as apostates who are either unwilling or unable to participate in this central Christian sacrament. Indeed, the obscurity with which both Christ and the sacrament are depicted in these opening lines may function as an artful method of indicating this very detachment from Christian ritual on the part of the speaker. This interpretation aligns with that proffered in response to *Wulf and Eadwacer* more broadly in this article, in that the speaker’s relationship with Wulf has left her in dangerous isolation from, and even opposition to, both her faith and her community.

Such a reading cannot be applied, however, to the reoccurrence of the formulation *willað hy hine āþecgan gif hē on prēat cymeð* at line 7; the relatively straightforward lines 4–6 introduce Wulf, detail his separation from the speaker as necessitated by both the impassable terrain of the fens and the hostility of the *walreowe weras* that dwell on one of the islands, most likely the one which is inhabited by the speaker. The figures referred to by the pronouns in line 7 are more certain, therefore, as is the violent implication of what the *weras* will do to Wulf if he comes into their company. The more apparent sense of the formulation in the context of line 7, before which specifics regarding actors and location have been supplied, does not, however, necessitate that an identical sense is being employed in line 2, particular as the sparse detail of line 1 does not obviously suggest that the speaker’s people are about to engage in violence, particularly as their interaction with the unnamed individual seems only positive in his bestowing a gift upon them. A potential solution to this issue, if it is accepted that the poem draws a consistent contrast between the actions associated with the hateful Wulf on earth and those possible in the acceptance of the heavenly Lord, is that the meaning of the phrase is altered ironically depending on who is being referred to. This construction, which at first suggests the veneration of Christ by the Christian community, can also express the persecution of Wulf by the same collective; furthermore, the speaker’s use of the same equivocal language to describe her community’s interactions with Wulf and Christ, might serve as an attempt to represent her conflicted mindset as to her relationships with both figures as, at the outset of the poem, she is torn between moral duty and sexual desire. From these initial lines, therefore, it can be contended that the *ungelic* nature of the speaker’s two potential husbands, the spiritual and the profane, is established, a condition that builds throughout the poem towards her divorce of Wulf and a full commitment to the Christian God.

Conclusion: Towards a Supplicatory Reading of *Wulf and Eadwacer*

This article has aimed to provide a new reading of *Wulf and Eadwacer* grounded within a Christian framework of despair in the postlapsarian nature of relationships in this world alongside an expectation of a perfected intimacy with God in the next. As noted at the outset of this piece, however, the above analysis should be considered complementary, rather than contradictory, to previous scholarship on this notoriously elusive poem and does not seek to provide an authoritative solution to the text. Rather, this interpretation demonstrates how plausible and innovative approaches to *Wulf and Eadwacer* can readily be generated by shifting the initial premises from which our engagement with the poem extends; the concurrent existence of numerous distinct understandings of *Wulf and Eadwacer* does not suggest the failure of critics but rather the enduring success of this short, rich poem, which can so readily sustain multiple divergent readings.

The primary difference in interpretation that initiates the reading offered in this article is in taking *eadwacer* not as the personal name of a man known to the speaker of the poem, but rather as a poetic compound with a sense approximate to ‘the one watchful over joy’ and which refers to the Christian God. This contention is supported by a systematic survey of other *ead-* compounds found in Old English poetry, wherein *ead-* consistently inflects the second stem with divine or spiritual significance. If the second stem *wacer* is taken as having the same meaning as the better attested adjective *wacor*, the latter term’s overwhelming extant usage in connection with pastoral watchfulness elsewhere in the corpus should be taken as important evidence for a parallel being drawn in the poem between two opposing figures who are metonymically associated with the wolf and the shepherd. The poem as a whole rests on the speaker’s conflicted emotions as she expounds on her self-identification as a figure outcast from her community and the Christian rituals which define it. This state is inextricable from her relationship with Wulf, who embodies all the danger and sorrow of a profane relationship but who is, simultaneously, the object of overt sexual pleasure and romantic desire on the speaker’s part. The speaker is tormented by her self-awareness of the moral consequences of her desire for an inconstant and antisocial figure and an audience familiar with Old English elegy and hagiography might be expected to draw a contrast with the spiritual wisdom and ascetic holiness that pious characters achieve in isolation elsewhere in the poetic corpus. In this reading, *Wulf and Eadwacer* conforms more closely to the elegiac model, moving from a melancholy exploration of that which is ephemeral yet attractive in the terrestrial world, to the blissful consolation promised through faith in God. The comparative ambiguity of these sentiments in this poem, in comparison with elegies more generally, lies within their navigation through the limited scope of the speaker’s relationship and in a mode that centres upon affect rather than exhortation.

The transition from lament to consolation occurs with the climactic line *gehyrest þu, eadwacer*, which can, therefore, be understood as a direct appeal to God that initiates the prayer of supplication that runs from line 16 to the poem’s conclusion. The extent of the speaker’s anguish as Wulf absconds with their child leads her to appeal to God for the divine dissolution of their relationship and her consequent deliverance from the wretched state that desire for an antisocial figure has reduced her to. The final lines of *Wulf and Eadwacer* provide something akin to closure for the speaker in allowing her to put voice to her permanent separation from Wulf at the very moment her declamation of the poem itself ends. Throughout this article, a number of potential rationales for adopting the reading proposed

here have been suggested, but the most critical, in my view, is its potential to complicate the character of the speaker beyond traditional portraits of simple misery occasioned by adultery, while also maintaining the romantic tension so central to the poem's tone. The speaker is a woman who is highly aware of the conflict between her sexual desire and her Christian faith and negotiates the fraught and complex nature of her dual commitment to two patriarchs. Her ultimate renunciation of Wulf functions as a broader rejection of melancholy lamentation as typifying the poem, as the speaker's sophisticated reaffirmation of her personal relationship with God ends *Wulf and Eadwacer* in a mood of pious hope.