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# Lament during the Pandemic

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## Abstract

A personal essay about reading and teaching Old English laments during a global pandemic.

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*Often the wanderer awaits mercy, though he, spirit-sorrowful, long must stir with his hands the rime-cold sea.*<sup>1</sup>

Last term I taught ENGL 3006: Old English. I'm not an Old English scholar; I just think it is important that a university degree in English include at least the option of a course on the earliest works in the language. Our department has been decimated by retirements that have not been replaced ... and so I teach it.<sup>2</sup>

The poetry is powerful: dense, striking, full of visions of cold, winter, northern cliffs covered in frost. Women wait for their partners (husbands? illicit loves?); men fight monsters, dragons, each other; feuds escalate in bloody cycles or are calmed by clever peace-brides or generous gold-givers. I've taught these stories in various classes over the years, sometimes in the gut-punching original language, sometimes in translation from Old into Modern English.

Teaching Old English elegies online during a pandemic, though, was something else.

*Where has the horse gone? Where is the warrior? Where is the giver of treasure?*<sup>3</sup>

My students and I were experiencing so many losses. The big losses, of course—jobs, opportunities, in-person classes, entire livelihoods. People who had died and are continuing to die. But also the smaller griefs: popping in to the grocery store on the way home, meeting a friend for lunch, hanging out and chatting with my students after class. Drinking coffee in a coffee shop. Smiles not hidden behind masks.

One of the larger griefs, during these times, is the loss of communal ways of grieving. Funerals are banned, lest they lead to more funerals. Hugs are taboo. People not only die, they die alone, away from their families and friends, accompanied on their journey into death—if they're lucky—only by a wonderful, exhausted, over-worked, over-grieved support worker or nurse, swathed and alien in plastic, holding up an iPad. Community laments are tweeted, communicated with Facebook profile-picture frames, or conveyed via utterly inadequate hug emojis. Drive-thru funerals, tattered roadside flowers.

Blue hearts in the windows of Nova Scotia after the worst mass shooting in Canadian history.

An elderly friend—one of those acquaintances who loom large in your life even though you're not close—died recently. In the before-times the church would have been standing room only. Now we share paltry reminiscences online: *she taught me to sing. She always served tea in exquisite teacups—I still have the one she gave me. I remember her Iolanthe, in the Gilbert & Sullivan society.*

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<sup>1</sup> *The Wanderer*, ll. 1a-4b. Translations mine throughout unless otherwise indicated. Line references taken from "The Wanderer," Anglo-Saxons.net.

<sup>2</sup> With thanks to Tatiana Cooper, Susanna Cupido, and all the students of the online class in Old English, Winter 2021.

<sup>3</sup> *The Wanderer*, ll. 92a-b.

*Wine-halls are in ruins, rulers lie joy-bereft. The proud host by the wall has all perished.*<sup>4</sup>

But our culture, even before the pandemic, never did lament well.

My grandmother hated funerals. I can still see her, white, stiff, elegant, lips pressed tight holding herself together. She'd have died herself, of shame, of embarrassment, if she had done something so unseemly as to cry in public.

Other peoples, other times, cry and wail and tear their hair, keen loudly. Communal grief is ritualized catharsis, and I would guess that people feel better afterwards—connected to community, relieved of the immediate pain of sorrow.

I wouldn't know; I've never been part of such a culture.

My culture, mainstream WASPish North American culture, does communal grief poorly. We watch endless news reports, reporters shoving their microphones into private sorrows (just doing their job). We have “celebrations of life” rather than face the reality of loss. We buy grocery-store flowers, pile them beside make-shift memorials, leave them to wilt.

(Who cleans up those dead flowers wrapped in plastic, when it's all over?)

*Where now the seats of the banquets? Where now the hall-joys?*<sup>5</sup>

My class and I read the Old English Elegies this past term—*The Wanderer*, *The Wife's Lament*, *Wulf and Eadwacer*, the embedded laments in *Beowulf*.

We ‘zoomed’ together to talk about the differences in the cultures between now and then. The students learned how important a person's kin and lord were, how strong a person's ties of loyalty. Losing these connections—whether through war or exile—was the equivalent of death.

Indeed, scholars speculate that the character of Wulf, in *Wulf and Eadwacer*, was an outlaw, since another name for outlaw was a “wolf's head”: the reward for killing an outlaw was the same as the reward for killing a wolf.

We learn that swooning, weeping, mourning, was not considered unmanly.

*Alas, the bright cup! Alas the mailed warrior! Alas the prince's glory!*<sup>6</sup>

The students noticed that not a single woman is mentioned in the poem *The Wanderer*. We realized *The Wife's Lament* tells the woman's side of the story – stuck at home while her men are off adventuring, fighting, in exile. She shows us the costs of the heroic values we had been absorbing, the flip side of the feuds and fighting, for the brides at home or traded like property meant to keep the peace. We learned about a real-life, twice successful peace-bride, Emma of Normandy.

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<sup>4</sup> *The Wanderer*, ll. 78a-80a.

<sup>5</sup> *The Wanderer*, ll. 93a-b.

<sup>6</sup> *The Wanderer*, ll. 94a-95a.

We observed that even though the Wanderer thought he was in a terrible state, as low as he could go, he could still travel, and had hopes of finding a new lord and community. The Wife didn't even have that, trapped in one place, locked down.

As we were locked down.

*The world is too large, the steadings and the fields.<sup>7</sup>*

The weather was our go-to icebreaker, in the chit-chat while we were waiting each class for everyone to show up: what's the weather like where you are? Snowy, sleet here, you? One of my students was in Winnipeg, often sitting in the sun while the New Brunswick and Nova Scotian students huddled inside out of the rain; I could see misty Cape Breton hills out the window behind another student. The weather was ever-present, too, in the works we were reading, *frost and snow fall, mingled with hail; ruined walls stand beaten by the wind, rime-covered.*<sup>8</sup> The Wanderer has *ferthloca freorig*, frozen feelings.<sup>9</sup>

We were numbed by a year of being pummeled by the pandemic.

We spent more time than ever before on the laments embedded in *Beowulf*. They hit harder, this year, jumped out more. Early in the last section of the story, as the threats are closing in, they start: first as lament-similes, not even real laments, introduced by "it was as if" or "he felt like a father whose heir hangs on the gallows",<sup>10</sup> then, as the social and personal cost of Beowulf's macho heroism becomes apparent, real laments. Finally, Beowulf's funeral, a pyre on the cliffs, a woman keening the loss not just of her lord but of her whole society, *a wild litany of nightmare and lament*, in the words of Seamus Heaney's translation.<sup>11</sup>

We wrote our own laments.

*The brownies in the café on Coburg. The feeling of stepping on a plane, of a foreign street in the rain.*

Where now are the happy crowds, where the stranger's handshakes?

Where are the random smiles, the droppings-in, the lunches out?

Where now is the busyness, the unnervousness, the thoughtless comfort of erranding?

*All is gone, vanished under the helm of night, as though it never was.<sup>12</sup>*

All gone, gone like the memory of painless youth,

like a smile behind a mask,

like a chalked thank-you heart in the rain.

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<sup>7</sup> *Beowulf*, ll. 2461b-262a.

<sup>8</sup> *The Wanderer*, ll. 48, 76-77.

<sup>9</sup> *The Wanderer*, l. 33a.

<sup>10</sup> *Beowulf*, ll. 2544a-246a.

<sup>11</sup> Heaney, ll. 3152b-353a.

<sup>12</sup> *The Wanderer*, ll. 95b-96b.

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