PAPERS FROM THE
IVth INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE
OF THE SPANISH SOCIETY FOR
MEdIEVAL ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

Editor:
Teresa Fanego Lema

Co-editors:
Aneila Fraga Fuentes • Luis Iglesias Rábade • Mª José López Couso
Belén Méndez Naya • Isabel Moskovich-Spiegel

SEPARATA

1993
PAPERS FROM THE
IVTH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE
OF THE SPANISH SOCIETY FOR
MEDIEVAL ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

Editor:
Teresa Fanego Lema

Co-editors:
Amelia Fraga Fuentes • Luis Iglesias Rábade • Mª José López Couso
Belen Méndez Naya • Isabel Moskowich-Spiegel

SEPARATA

1993
Modulation and Hybridization in the Old English Elegies

Mª José Mora

Ever since Conybeare first used the label «elegiac» to describe an Anglo-Saxon poem, The Exile's Lament (the title he gave to The Wife's Lament), the group of poems we have come to call the Old English Elegies has elicited a great deal of critical attention. The amount of critical studies produced about it is perhaps second only to that generated by Beowulf. Much has certainly been accomplished towards a better understanding of the poems; yet, more than 150 years after Conybeare's introduction of the generic term, the most striking conclusion we can draw out of this mass of scholarship is that there seems to be very little agreement on the most basic issues, namely the definition of the genre and of the corpus itself.

Of the nine pieces that are regularly classed as elegies, The Wanderer, The Seafarer, The Rime Poem, Don, Wulf and Eadwacer, The Wife's Lament, Resignation, The Husband's Message and The Ruin (with the occasional addition of two fragments from Beowulf, «The Lay of the Last Survivor» and «The Father's Lament,» and perhaps the «Messenger's Speech» in Guðrún 1348-78), every single one has at some point been excluded from the group by a leading scholar, with good arguments. Tynan, for instance, disqualifies all poems but Wulf and Wife; Bloomfield, however, in a different, though equally reductive analysis, classes as elegies only the «Lay of the Last Survivor», the Geatish woman's song of mourning on the death of Beowulf and a section in Wæstan, lines 17-59 (150-51). Definitions of the genre are only inclusive when they are based on the description of the common features in the poems, but that leaves the generic definition dependent on that of the corpus. On the other hand, most of the elegies have been coherently interpreted as belonging to a genre other than the elegiac. Obviously, the question of the genre of the Old English elegies is far from solved. In this paper I will try to analyze the sources of
this confusion and suggest some guidelines for a new definition of elegy in Old English.

Before reviewing some of these positions I would like to stress the importance of the definition of the genre. The need to define the elegiac corpus and, at the same time, the generic category of elegy in Old English does not arise out of an obsession with taxonomy worthy of nineteenth century naturalists. As Alastair Fowler points out, «There is no doubt that genre primarily has to do with communication. It is an instrument not of classification or prescription, but of meaning» (22); and he adds: «We identify genre to interpret the exemplar» (38). Certainly, the assignation of a work to a particular genre does affect our idea of what and how this work means. A good case in point is Wulf. For the best part of the nineteenth century, the poem was classed, as a riddle; its most ingenious interpretation was perhaps that provided by Trautmann in 1883: the speaker in the poem is the riddle itself; Wulf is the man who tries to conquer her—i.e. solve the riddle. At the outset they are each on an island—separated—. The ten surrounding the island stands for the difficulties besetting Wulf’s task, whereas the warriors stand for rivals also trying to solve the riddle (158-69). However, when in 1888 Henry Bradley claimed that the poem was not a riddle, but «a fragment of a dramatic soliloquy, like Doer and The Banished Wife’s Complaint,» the meaning of the poem was reinterpreted along with the genre: «the speaker...[is] a woman. Apparently she is a captive in a foreign land. Wulf is her lover and an outlaw, and Edswarce...her tyrant husband» (197-98). The elucidation of the genre does seem to have much to contribute to the understanding of the poems themselves.

The confusion stems first of all from the fact that we do not have a native definition of elegy in Old English. As far as we know, the Anglo-Saxons did not write any poetries of the vernacular. The only poetries in a related language is Snorri’s Eddas, and this does not seem to be concerned with genre. Snorri discerns only two categories in poetry: language and verse forms, and that is what he sets out to investigate (64). The only evidence we have for the existence of a type of poetry similar to our elegies are some references, not always very clear, to the singing of sad songs such as Hrothgar’s «gyd,» which is described as «soth and sarlic» (Beowulf 2109b-10a). Alois Brandl claims that we have further proof for the existence of elegy as a blooming genre in Old English in the glosses, when terms like wopleth and sarlic toth, which could be associated with our elegies, are used to render ingaedia and trenos (35). But this evidence is still rather elusive, since the Old English terms are obviously not exact equivalents of the Greek genres, and merely refer to the sad character of these compositions (whatever a wopleth was, it was not drama).

Since native intuitions of the genre are not very explicit, the scholar attempting to define the elegiac genre in Old English is faced with two basic alternatives: either to find a standard, universal definition of elegy and apply it to Anglo-Saxon poetry,
or to construct a definition starting from the nine poems we are accustomed to think of as elegies. The first alternative appears to be problematic. The concept designated by the generic label of elegy has changed significantly throughout its history, and universal definitions are very hard to arrive at. When considering the Old English elegy scholars are quick to point out that the idea of elegy in these poems does not correspond to our current conception of the genre. In this line Charles Kennedy feels obliged to explain: «These Old English elegies differ markedly from the personal elegy. They do not lament the death, or eulogize the life, of an individual» (103-04), and García Tortosa warns us:

> Aceptar sin precauciones el concepto de elegía de los manuales al uso podría ocasionar graves malentendidos, si los aplicamos a la época anglosajona, ya que existen diferencias fundamentales, temáticas y formales, entre la definición que puede derivarse de conocidas elegías, como Lycidas de Milton, Adonais de Shelley, o Astropoli de Spencer y las del período anglosajón. En líneas generales... las elegías anglosajonas no son un canto plástico a la muerte de un ser querido, ni naturalmente se ajustan a los cánones formales de los poemas antes mencionados. (44)

Current definitions of elegy are thus felt to be misleading.

The classics cannot help us out either. In classical literature elegy is just a verse form (a combination of hexameter and pentameter), and covers a wide spectrum of moods and topics from the patriotic exhortation of Callinus and Tyrtaus to the melancholy mood of Ovid's Tristia. The formal definition cannot easily apply to Old English. Barbara Gribble has argued, with statistical support, that the Old English elegy has a distinctive verse form, in which verses of the B- and particularly C-type dominate (456). But she seems to infer too much from a statistical analysis of short excerpts from only five texts (Maldon, Brendanburi, Sex, Wun, and sections from Beowulf); and the differences she finds seem to be almost negligible in a few instances. Until more comprehensive studies are produced, we will have to conclude that, except for sporadic experimentations with rhyme or refrain, Anglo-Saxon poetry knows only one basic verse form: the alliterative line. The distribution of verse-types is hard to pin down. The definition of elegy in Old English cannot therefore be drawn on the classical model.

The second alternative proves easier. We simply need to produce a comprehensive list of features common to most of the poems in the received corpus. This approach, however, is not very effective, as we can see in Kennedy's definition. Kennedy explains that the poems are described as elegies «from their mood of sadness and lament» and adds:

> their range of interest is universal, deriving from a moving sense of the tragedy of life itself—*sunt lacrimae rerum*—a consciousness of the transience of earthly joy, and the fleeting glory of earthly strength. Their rhythm is tuned
to the ceaseless flow of time and change, their pathos springs from knowledge that all life moves with frail feet and fragile wings. Their dignity clothes a recognition that man’s years of breath are first a hope and brief struggle, then silence, memory, and the ruins of time. (103-04)

The definition is almost as beautiful as the poems themselves, but rather vague: it does not describe the structural elements in the poems or the devices they use to construct meaning. The best attempt to define the genre on these lines has been the one put forth by Anne Klinck in her paper “The Old English Elegy as a Genre.” Klinck argues for the existence of an elegiac tradition in Old English, with its themes, motifs and even characteristic form. The elegiac form is that of a monologue, and basic structural elements would be a conventional introduction of the speaker, gnomic conclusion, repetition of key phrases or entire lines, and occasionally rhyme. These features, Klinck concedes, are not exclusive to the elegies, nor are all of them displayed by any particular poem, but the combination of some of them is distinctive; they make up a “nexus” of elegiac elements (130).

The most serious objection we can raise to this definition is that it is drawn out of a corpus that is not clearly delimited. The nine poems we call elegies are grouped nowadays on the authority of our ‘feel’ for them as a group possessing certain features in common,” to use Greenfield’s phrasing (135). But there is no way of knowing how far this ‘feel’ of ours coincides with the Anglo-Saxon, and whether the nine elegies were ever felt by them to be members of a single poetic class or genre. Indeed, in their critical history they have not always been thought to form a group. Conybeare listed only The Exile’s Lament (Wife) perhaps also the Metres of Beowulf, in the section “Elegiac Poetry,” although he called “elegies” two poems under the heading “Odes and Epitaphs”; the chronicle poems on the death of Kings Edward and Edgar (lxxxi). Etzmüller in 1850 included a few of the elegies in the section “lyrical poetry” (“De lyrice Anglorum Saxonumque poesibus”), but classed Branunburh and Widsith in the same group (xliv-xlv). Stopford A. Brooke called Deor a “true lyric,” but would not give other elegies (Wam, Sea, Wife) the same rank (6-7). Rim and Res were repeatedly left out of the group and classed as prayers or religious poetry (Timmer 40) whereas Deor was often identified as heroic poetry, unrelated to the elegies (Malone 1-2).

The canonic corpus was finally defined by Sieper in 1915, when he included all nine poems in his work Die altenglische Elegie. But the striking thing is that in his book-length study on the subject, Sieper does not bother to define the genre. As a matter of fact, neither does any scholar in the nineteenth century or beginning or the twentieth. Only occasionally do they give us a hint of what they mean by elegy, as Ten Brink in his comment: “The Old English lyrical feeling knows in reality but one art-form, that of the elegy. Painful longing for vanished happiness is its key note. It seeks to voice this mood in reflective and descriptive language” (61-62). The reason why they did not need to define the genre is perhaps that they used the idea
of elegy they had inherited from the Romantics (personal poetry, characterized by a mixture of feeling and meditation), which was still applicable at the time. But after the break with the cultural tradition effected in the first decades of the twentieth century, critics feel the need to explain the grouping of the poems is no longer self-explanatory, since the conception of genre that had served to shape the corpus is no longer valid.

The historical evolution of generic categories is therefore at the root of our problems with the definition of the Old English elegy. We have to define a genre that was established not so much on native categories, but on Romantic or post-Romantic conceptions that are not second nature to us. But if we are prepared to go back to the late nineteenth century and accept a definition that will explain as much a type of poetry in Old English as these first critics’ reaction to it, we can then define the Old English elegy as pathetic discourse, a kind of personal poetry that combines feeling and meditation, a “gyd,” in the end, “soth and sarlic.”

But even if we accept this as a working definition of elegy our problems are far from solved. See, for instance, is indeed personal, and a “gyd soth and sarlic,” as the very first line reminds us (”Maeg ic be me sylfum sothgied wreccan”). So is its companion piece Wan. But still they are often left out of the elegiac group. Timmer, for instance, conceives that these two poems show elegiac elements, but insists that they should be better classed as “religious didactic lyrics”: “the elegiac parts of the Wanderer and the Seafarer serve as an introduction to the main idea and main purpose of these poems, which are pieces of religious propaganda” (38). Since there is a central purpose to the poems other than the lament, he flatly denies them, and indeed most of the elegies, the generic category: “most of those poems that are at present often called elegies do not deserve that name” (38). As many other scholars, Timmer seems to have an idealized concept of the separateness of genre.

This problem applies to all nine poems. They all combine in different degrees feeling and meditation; they are all “soth and sarlic.” Yet their definition as elegies is often problematic. They have all, however, been explained as belonging to a different genre. To name only a few examples, Wan has been defined as a Latin consolatio (Cross); Sea as a homily (Arngart 252); Deer as a catalogue-poem (Howe 166-201); Wife and Wulf as Frauenlieder or women-songs (Malone; Davidson); Res as penitential poetry (Bestul); Rim as biblical poetry, a paraphrase of Job 29-30 (Thorpe 152-53); Ruin as a poem in the encomium urbis tradition (Lee); and Hésd as part of a poem of the cross (Kaske).

Some of these classifications are very convincing. But even if we accept them, that does not mean we have to abandon the idea of these poems as members of an elegiac group. Ideally defined, genres are pure, discrete entities. But this ideal has only been upheld in the most radically classicist periods (such as perhaps the 18th century). Even the classics, whom we go back to for the definition of most generic
categories, allowed for a considerable amount of generic flexibility and mixture (Cairns 127-228). In his discussion of genre, Alastair Fowler makes a distinction between kinds, the historical or fixed genres (56), and modes which, he says, «involve a more elusive generic idea» (106). Modes, in Fowler's definition, «is a selection or abstraction from kind. It has few, if any external rules, but evokes a historical kind through samples of its internal repertoire» (56). This evocation of kind is, Fowler claims, more than a vague intimation of «mood»: «A mode announces itself by distinct signals... The signals may be of a wide variety: a characteristic motif, perhaps; a formula» (107). Elegy in Old English very often seems to work in this way, as mode rather than kind. Whatever definition of elegy we try to apply to our poems, many of them will always appear to be lacking in quite a few important generic constituents. Yet they all evoke the elegiac kind, and they do so through their use of characteristic elegiac motifs or formulas.

Modes, moreover, often appear in combination with another kind. This mixture is termed by Fowler generic modulation. In modulation one of the genres is just «a modal abstraction with a token repertoire. In modulation the proportions of the modal ingredient may vary widely, which leads to correspondingly various effects, from overall tones to touches of local colour» (Fowler 191). Fowler also speaks of generic hybrids, «where two or more complete repertoires are present» (189). If we follow Fowler in rejecting the idea of genres as separate, ideal entities, and work with these concepts of generic mixture, most of the problems we encounter with the assignment of elegiac pieces to other genres begin to disappear.

To go back to Wæl and Sei, it has to be granted that Cross's argumentation for Wæl as a consolatio is certainly cogent. It has, as Leslie points out, «the merit of being demonstrable of passages in both halves of the poem» (30). But even if the external structure of the poem is that of a consolatio, it is written in the elegiac mode. The consolatory topos are repeatedly built on themes (such as the «ruin» theme; the «exile» theme), and formulas (for instance, the x-leas formula) which are characteristically elegiac. It is the evocative power of these themes and formulas that is responsible for our 'feel' for this poem as a member of the elegiac group. Wæl may indeed be a consolatio, but with elegiac modulation.

Armgarth's case for the embedding of the elegy in the homiletic structure of Sei is also persuasive:

The first portion of the piece, lines 1-64a, offers the text that is further developed in the second part. The poet tells a story, sets up an exemplum, which he proceeds to expound in the latter half of the poem, lines 64b ff, by attaching it to a lesson in Christian life and morals. (252)

Armgarth, however, seems to have no problem with the mixture of generic categories. He concludes: «...the whole of The Seafarer... is homiletic as well as elegiac and lyric» (252). And indeed he is right. Sei is a hybrid of elegy and
homily. It has both a personal and a public scope; it is both reflective and admonitory. It starts off with characteristically elegiac phrasing ("Maeg ic be me sylfum sothgied wrecan"), and ends with the admonitory formula peculiar to the homilies ("Uton we...""). The poem, as we see, incorporates both repertoires.

This paper has not produced a final definition, or a full explanation of the genre of the Old English Elegies. Such enterprise is certainly out of the scope of this paper. I have just attempted to address some of the difficulties besetting our task and suggest guidelines for future work. Further studies will, I think, have to contemplate the fact that we are dealing with a corpus that was defined in the late nineteenth century, and that the post-Romantic conception of elegy mediates the definition of the genre. They will also have to work with more and more flexible generic categories: kinds and modes, and generic mixture. There is still much to be done. The definition of Old English Elegy is still on one island; we are on the other. But we have some clues to solve the riddle.
REFERENCES


Brooke, Stopford A. The History of Early English Literature. New York: 1892.


Trautmann, Moritz. «Cynwulf and die Rätsel.» Anglia 6 (1883): 158-69.