

## The Wife's Lament (extract)

A short Old English poem of 53 lines preserved in the *Codex Exonienses* or *Exeter Book*, held to date from between 960 and 990. The text is an elegy where an anonymous female speaker expresses her grief and her state of despair at being separated from “my lord” (that is, her husband) in a state of exile from her homeland.

I will speak my plight's tale, care-wretched, about myself. I can say: what woes I've borne growing up, present and past, were all less than now. I have won, for my exile-paths, just pain. First, my lord left: over deep seas, far from people, and I've grieved each morning, where, earth-wide, he could be. Then I left: voyaging sought service -sad exile- for my woeful desires! My lord's kin schemed secretly: that they'd estrange us, keep us most apart, across the earth-kingdom, and my heart suffered. My lord bade me: take dwelling here. I had few friends in this land, no devoted comrades-so I feel as if lost! I had found a man full fit to me, though unfortunate, spiritually fraught-a feigning mind, bliss visaged but planning a crime! Full oft we vowed we'd never part, not till death alone, nothing else; but that is changed, our friendship -is now, as if it never were. I must hear, far and near, contempt for my beloved. My man bade me live by the grove's wood, beneath the oak tree, in an earth-cave. This cave is old- I am all oppressed -the valleys dim, mountains steep-a bitter home! tangled with vines -an arid dwelling! The cruelty hits after my lord's absence! On earth there are lovers, living in love, they share the same bed, meanwhile... I go alone each dawn, by the oak and earth-cave, where I sit, summerlong days. There, I might weep my exile-paths, its many woes, because an anxious mind won't rest, nor this sorrow, which wrests from me this life. A young man must be

stern, hard-of-heart, stand blissful,  
opposing breast-cares and his sorrows'  
legions. All world-joy should wake  
from himself, for wide and far, in  
foreign folk-lands, my friend sits  
under a hard slope, frosted by storms,  
silenced for a friend, water bordering  
his sad-hall! My friend suffers sorrow;  
he knows too oft his home was joyful.  
Woe to those who live longing all  
for a loved one.