Images of Stoicism, Courage and the Germanic Comitatus in *The Wife’s Lament*, the *Fight at Finnsburgh* and *The Wanderer*

There is a quiet, dignified portrayal of stoicism through the single plaintive voice of the *Wife’s Lament*. *The Wife’s Lament*, contrasts strongly with *The Fight at Finnsburgh* in many ways, even though it uses the *Germanic Comitatus* heroic ethic and metaphorises it through the exile of the wife. The theme of exile is a common theme in the Anglo-Saxon period and it is strongly associated with the Lord and Retainer relationship of the Germanic Comitatus.

The tone of the poem is meditative, reflective, sad and poignant. It is an interior dramatic monologue and its quiet psychological nature is the most striking contrast with the dramatic action of the *Fight at Finnsburgh* and yet both poems reflect the Germanic Comitatus way of thinking. The writer of *The Wife’s Lament* universalises the heroic epitaph of the *Germanic Comitatus* in stream-of-consciousness technique and personifies it through the courage and stoicism of an exiled woman. The grief of the woman is elegiacised. The predicament is the classic Anglo-Saxon situation of a woman torn between her husband and family. The writer takes the predicament of the exile in the Lord and Retainer Comitatus relationship and uses it as a metaphor for the separation of the wife and the person who is closest to her, who she describes as her husband ‘dearest’.
In elegiac form *The Wifes Lament* is similar to *The Wonderer* especially in the metaphorical situation of the exile. The poet shows great sensitivity to the suffering and hardship connected with the lot of the exile. Both *The Wonderer* and *The Wifes Lament* begin with a prologue which announces the details of the suffering the individual has endured:

Ic þis giedd wrece bi me ful geomorre,  
minre sylfre sið. Ic þæt secgan mæg  
hwæt ic yrmþa gebad, siþþan ic up weox,  
niwes oþþe ealdes, no ma þonne nu.

I sing this song about myself, full sad,  
My own distress, and tell what hardships I  
Have had to suffer since I first grew up,

And in *The Wonderer*:

Oft him anhaga are gebideð  
Metudes miltse, þeah þe he modcearig  
geond lagulade longe sceolde.

Often the solitary man enjoys  
The grace and mercy of the Lord,

In the first two lines of the Wife’s Lament the words ‘geomorre’ and ‘minre sylfre’ indicate a female speaker, because of the use here of the feminine inflection. The wife laments because she suffers grief through banishment that means that they are the victims of a breach of the Germanic comatitatus, for which banishment and exile are punishment.

The poem goes on to list the causes of her wretched condition and ends with a lament for what has been and is no more. It makes use of gnomic lines that illustrate the importance of endurance with courage and stoicism in the face of adversity in this transitory world of ‘earth-dwellers’:
Lines 43-47:

A scyle geong mon wesan geomormod,
heard heortan geþoht; swcyle habban sceal
bliepe gebæro, eac þon breostceare,
sinsorgna gedreag; sy æt him syflum gelong
eal hin worulde wyn.

A young man must always be serious,
And tough his character; likewise he should
Seen cheerful, even though his heart is sad
With multitude of cares. All earthly joy
Must come from his own self.

It compares also with The Wonderer: 11-14

Ic to sōþe wat
þæt biþ in eorle indryhten þeaw
þæt he his ferðlocan faeste binde,
Healdæ his hordcofan, hycge swa he wille.

That in a man it is a noble virtue
To hide his thoughts, lock up his private feelings,
However he may feel.

The protagonists are concerned with ‘locking away their suffering’ and ‘holding cares inside’ and enduring suffering with fortitude, ‘breostcearne sinsorgna gedreag’ and ‘ferðlocan faeste binde’ refer to holding emotional cares within - much like the brave warriors who fought bravely and held the doors at the Fight at Finnsburgh. This is a typical example of Anglo-Saxon bravery. Where the poet of the Fight at Finnsburgh made much of physical stoicism, the poet of The Wife’s lament concentrates on emotional strength and courage in spiritual hardship. Each of these attributes are drawn from the Germanic comitatus and poeticised and universalized in the case of The Wife’s Lament and The Wonderer.
In Line 27 of *The Wife’s Lament* refers to the word ‘faehdu’ (feud) this word reveals that she is the victim of a family feud. The lamenting wife refers to her husband as ‘hlaford’ in line 6-8 - a metaphor for the Lord and Retainer relationship of the Comitatus and a variation on the word ‘husband’. She is a friendless exile in ‘sorry plight’ and she implies that her husband’s kinsmen have ‘plotted secretly’ about how they might separate the lovers. She states that she is totally alone and living in ‘wretchedness’

As with *The Wonderer*, the poet of *The Wife’s Lament* communicates through the personal experience the individual the internal and external feelings of desolation and neglect. The surrounding natural scene not only reflects the physical state of her exile but also her spiritual metaphorical state:

Heht mec mon wunian on wuda bearwe,
under actreo in þam eordscræfe.
Eald is þes eordsele, eal ic eom oflongad;
sindon dena dimme, duna uphea,
bitre burgtunas brerum beweaxne,
wic wynna leas.

The feud of my beloved husband dear,
So in this forest grove they made me dwell,
Under the oak-tree, in this earthly barrow.
Old is this earth-cave, all I do is yearn.

The ‘eordscræfe’ kenning on the word ‘grave’ might be perceived as a symbolic ironical reference to her living death as well as the pitiable refuge of the exiled woman. The overgrown desolate natural scene reflects her internal miserable solitude and outward neglect and symbolic of her spiritual condition, evokes a profound sense of pity for the woman and yet at the same time evokes a sense of admiration for her strength in enduring her exile with resolute Anglo-Saxon stoicism.
Having first emphasized her aloneness by the use of the natural landscape, the poet then contrasts her situation with lovers who are lying together in their beds, while she, ‘alone at crack of dawn must walk under the oak tree and round this earthy cave’.

Frynd sind on eorþan,
leofe lifgende, leger weardiað,
þonne ic on uhtan ana gonge
under actreo geond þas eordscrafu.

Full often here
The absence of my lord comes sharply to me.
Dear lovers in this world lie in their beds,
While I alone at crack of dawn must walk
Under the oak-tree round this earthly cave,

The exile of her husband is a parallel with her own, his state of exile reflects hers, what she suffers in the earth-cave, he endures in his desolate abode:

Sy ful wide fah,
feorres folclondes þæt min freond siteð,
under stanhlþe storme behrimed,
wine werigmod, wætre beflowen,
on dreorsele dreoged se min wine,
micle modceare; he gemon to oft,
wynlicran wic. Wa gemon to oft
wynlicran wic. Wa bið þam þe sceal
of langþe leofes abidan.

Since my dear lord
Is outcast, far off in a distant land,
Frozen by storms beneath a stormy cliff
And dwelling in some desolate abode
Beside the sea, my weary-hearted lord
Must suffer pitiless anxiety.
And all too often he will call to mind
A happier dwelling. Grief must always be
For him who yearnings longs for his beloved.

The immediacy of *The Wife’s Lament* is conveyed beautifully as her condition is compared with his. The poet evokes a sense of implicit togetherness in their mutual suffering in the graphic parallel of her situation with his. This, and the final words of
Anglo-Saxon wisdom the wife utters are compatible with the Germanic Comitatus code of heroism:

Wa bið þam þe sceal of langþe leofes abidan.

Grief must always be for him who yearning longs for his beloved.

Sad though her condition may be, her woe does not degenerate into despair for she has resolved to be strong. Stoicism and great courage are reflected in the last lines as she demonstrates that she is prepared to endure yet more pain in the hope that her beloved will return.