



The Lonely Afterlives of Early English Queens

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Abstract

Queens were important figures within the court communities of pre-Norman England, their status defined by their relationship to the king, whether as queen-consort, queen-mother, queen-regent, or queen-dowager. These were positions with an attendant degree of prestige and authority, but a vulnerability to the vicissitudes of the king's fortunes. Often this would lead to periods of exile from the court community. Such exiled queens could find refuge on their own lands or other communities, such as abbeys and foreign courts. This removal from the centre of power allowed the king to minimise or control any vestigial queenly status or authority, and guard against the exiled queen becoming a locus for alternative political factions. These queens-in-exile form the focus of this article, which seeks to establish not only the patterns and contexts that allowed such social isolation to occur, but queens' emotional responses to it. Here there are four interlinked concepts: social isolation (exile), emotional isolation (loneliness), social loneliness (the absence of community), and emotional loneliness (the absence of a close individual). These are observable across the experiences of an array of literary and historical pre-Norman queens, from *Beowulf* and *Elene* through to royal women, such as Æthelflæd (d. 918), Eadgifu (d. c.966), and Emma of Normandy (d. 1052). Through the analysis of such experiences, it is possible to construct cultural perspectives on the exercise of queenly authority, on queenly vulnerability, and on queenly affect.

Keywords Queenship · Exile · Loneliness · Old English · Medieval England

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The literature and history of early medieval England is replete with examples of exile and loneliness. These are key themes of Old English verse. The speaker in *The Wanderer* dwells at length on his loneliness and the absence of his lord; similar themes permeate *The Wife's Lament* and *Wulf and Eadwacer*. Exile is equally well represented in pre-Norman history. Alfred the Great (r. 871–899) was forced to flee to the Somerset fens in 878; St Dunstan (d. 988) was driven from English shores in 955; King Æthelred II (r. 978–1016), his sons Alfred *Æpelung* (d. 1036) and King Edward the Confessor (r. 1041–1066), and his aptly named grandson Edward the Exile (d. 1057), all experienced periods of displacement. No two examples of exile are exactly alike, and an individual's status, social standing, perceived transgressions, and the circumstances under which the exile occurred, informed its nature. Such contextualising details have been widely remarked of male exiles in early medieval England (Ashe, 2006), but female experiences of ostracism have been less widely observed. For queens or consorts, exile was informed by their connections to court politics, their proximity to the king, and their vulnerability to the vicissitudes of his fortunes. This is most clearly observed in examples from the historical record. Upon her husband's passing, a queen-consort transitioned into subsidiary roles such as queen-mother, queen-regent, or queen-dowager. Such positions came with an attendant, if reconstituted, degree of prestige and authority. In practice, however, this was often accompanied by exile from the court community. Such exiles often found refuge in other communities, primarily foreign courts and abbeys. Places where any vestigial queenly status was minimised or controlled. However, the historical record only rarely provides insight into the inner life of exiled queens; loneliness can be assumed, but not proven. In contrast, though the historicity of literary queenship is not always easily proven, these portraits of royal women can provide insight into societal perceptions of the personal aspects of queenly exile.

While loneliness can be an emotive response to exile, it is important that the two ideas are not conflated or seen as prescriptively causal, one to the other. Social and emotional isolation are separate concepts (Rokach, 2019, pp. 1–13): social isolation (exile) will not necessarily produce emotional isolation (loneliness), while the phenomenon of experiencing emotional isolation while in company is well observed (Lee & Ko, 2018). Moreover, sociologists have suggested that there are different dimensions to loneliness itself (de Jong Gierveld et al., 2006, pp. 486–7). Thus, what is seen in *The Wife's Lament* may be characterised as emotional loneliness (responding to the absence of a close individual), while the narrator of *The Wanderer* expresses both emotional loneliness and social loneliness (responding to the absence of community). Both types of loneliness can be observed across the spectrum of experience of England's pre-Norman queens, and attest to “exile” and “loneliness” as distinct, if interrelated concepts.

In exploring queenly experiences of exile and loneliness, this article takes the position that Anglo-Saxon queens must be defined as more than just a king's wife or bed companion (Stafford, 1983, pp. 127–9). English queenship had inherent within it certain customary roles and an invested authority that could take on something akin to political office, dependent upon the individual. Yet along with such prerogatives, authority, and office came vulnerability. That very agency could be a liability once a queen's connection to the king was broken, when they entered their “queenly after-

life". A widowed or repudiated queen's continued access to political power could make her a locus for disaffected political factions, or even grant royal legitimacy to a suitor. For new kings wary of these possibilities, exile was the answer.

The matter of queenly afterlives is as much a concern for early English literary texts as for historical sources.¹ The Old English epic *Beowulf* contains depictions of several queens whose afterlives present patterns of exilic circumstances (Overing, 1990, pp. 72–3). To borrow the words of Lois Huneycutt, "used carefully, literary sources can also provide a window into the role of the queen..." (2003, p. 31). Literary motifs of queenly exile are useful for the insight they give into societal perceptions of queens' lifecycles, of behavioural paradigms during transitions between phases of queenship, and of emotive and actual responses to the same. Such patterns as observed in *Beowulf* may therefore shed light on the actions of historical examples of queens in exile. Here this hypothesis is tested in the figure of Eadgifu (d. c.966), a queen-consort, queen-mother, and queen-dowager who experienced periods of exile from court as kingly power passed to and from the royal men with whom she was associated. We also contend, in a similar vein, that the Old English poem *Elene* can serve to illuminate cultural frameworks of loneliness in power, or the assuaging thereof, that can be mapped onto historical royal women such as Æthelflæd of Mercia (d. 918). It is, we argue, through the comparative analysis of literary and historical incumbents of the "office" of queenship, that cultural perspectives on the exercise of queenly authority and, more importantly, on methods of its legitimation and repudiation, may be illuminated.

Literary Exile: *Beowulf*

The queens of *Beowulf* have often been oversimplified as helpless victims by scholars like Overing (1990) and Saunders (2004, p. 195), among others. Increasingly, however, they are being observed as strong, enduring figures both in terms of their ability to survive in heroic society and their reputations (Bennett, 1992, p. 35). These women are individuals who outlive their kin and often constitute the last remnant of a fallen society in the wake of feud. This social symbolism is frequently compounded with their embodiment of the social role of peaceweaver (*freoðuwebbe*) and the literary motif of the mourning woman (*geomuru ides*). Despite the number of queens that appear in *Beowulf*, its subsidiary treatment of women produces a relative silence on its queens' fates after the death of their male kin. However, *Beowulf* does place a significant focus on the experience of queens in its depictions of feud, and such depictions have the potential to provide insight into the exilic lives that queens lead after they become bereft of kin and community.

Royal women are almost always defined by their relationships to their male kin. They are commonly introduced as the wife, widow, mother or daughter of the king or lord (Klein, 2006, p. 87). Furthermore, the roles that literary queens fulfil are designed to reinforce these relationships. Wealththeow, wife of King Hrothgar, exem-

¹ All quotations of Old English verse are from Krapp and Dobbie (1931–1953), excluding those from *Beowulf* which are taken from Bjork et al., (2008). All translations are those of the article's author(s).

plifies the incredibly public position of the queen when part of a stable and thriving community. Her participation in the role of cupbearer demonstrates the social centrality of the queen's position as well as how she may use her influence to enhance that of her lord. Wealhtheow is both literally and figuratively surrounded by the community while acting as a mediatory figure in her husband's court. She uses her social mobility to facilitate the generation and preservation of bonds of loyalty between Hrothgar and his retinue by weaving throughout the hall presenting the mead cup and addressing the warriors (Overing, 1990, pp. 96–7). Additionally, the queen reflects the wealth and status of the society in which she rules. Almost always appearing gold or ring-adorned (*gold-* or *beag-hroden*), the queens in *Beowulf* are symbolic of the prosperity, rich resources, and influence that their communities hold (Klein, 2006, p. 98).

The prosperous, civic image of the idealised queen positioned at the heart of her community is in stark opposition to how queens are depicted after their communities have been ravaged by feud. In *Beowulf*, and the wider poetic corpus, the queen's primary purpose is to facilitate social security. However, when that stability is lost, so too is the queen's purpose, thrusting her into a life of exile and loneliness (Hill, 1990, 237). Hildeburh, the queen at the centre of the Finnsburh episode, exemplifies this sudden transition. Initially married into the Frisian community to settle a feud, Hildeburh acts as a peaceweaver between the Frisians and the Danes. She provides an heir to her husband Finn, contributing to the potential longevity of the Danish community, only for her efforts to come to naught years later when feud breaks out between the tribes. In the ensuing conflict, Hildeburh loses all her closest kin. In an expression of emotional loneliness, Hildeburh publicly mourns at the pyre for her son and brother, only to later endure the further loss of her husband (Sebo & Schilling, 2021, pp. 639–40). Hildeburh's emotional loneliness is compounded by her concurrent social loneliness. The poem highlights the opposition of the queen's emotional state before losing kin and community, and after, when her life is redefined by her loss.

Nalles holinga Hoces dohtor
 meotodsceaft bemearn syþðan morgen com
 ða heo under swegle geseon meahte
 morþorbealo mága þaer he aer maeste heold
 worolde wynne (ll. 1076–1080a)

Not without cause did Hoc's daughter mourn the decree of fate when morning came. There under the light of the sky she could see her slaughtered kin; there where she before held the greatest of the world's joy.

This passage contrasts Hildeburh's previous happiness in the Frisian community—the greatest of the world's joy—with the mournful figure she becomes after the death of her kin (Hurley, 2019, p. 159). In the aftermath, Hildeburh, having no queenly roles left to perform beyond the sorrowful conducting of funeral rites, is then subjected to objectification when the Danes seize her and ferry her back with them as if she were a trophy of war (Overing, 1990, p. 86). Hildeburh survives, but without her marital kin and community, she is left bereft of agency and influence. Her value as a queen is nullified as she is forced to accept her lamentable situation.

A similar phenomenon is observed with Freawaru and her exogamous marriage to Ingeld, intended to end the Danish-Heaðobard feud. However, rather than losing her marital kin, Freawaru experiences social loneliness due to the loss of her natal kin at the hands of her new community. The allusion to the destruction of Heorot in this feud states “[the hall] awaited the fierce heat of hateful flames; it was not then the time that the furious sword-hate of son-in-law and father-in-law, arising from deadly enmity would awaken” (ll. 81–85).² As seemingly the last survivor of the Scylding community, Freawaru, like Hildeburh, is forced to remain with her enemies. This places her in a society in which she serves as a reminder of past conflicts that alienate her from the community and leave her stranded in a marriage in which “wife-love, after sorrow surges, becomes cold” (ll. 2065b–2066b).³ It has been suggested that this line is indicative of Ingeld’s repudiation of Freawaru (Malone, 1930, p. 260). However, the wording does not directly support such a reading (Huppé, 1939, p. 222). What the line does reveal is the emotional loneliness and isolation that accompanies Freawaru’s social loneliness, which is only enhanced by the proximity to her husband and his people. Consistent with the general silence on the fate of queens throughout the poetic corpus, there is a distinct absence of any comment on Freawaru’s actions and reactions to either her social loneliness, or the emotional loneliness from either the loss of her kin or the distancing of her husband.

The female-voiced elegy, *Wulf and Eadwacer*, however, may shed some light on the emotional loneliness endured when caught in a loveless union like Freawaru’s. The narrator, though not identifiable as a queen, is generally taken to be in a relationship with, if not married to, a lord named Eadwacer, and she expresses anger toward him and their union.⁴ Her stream of consciousness articulates “a series of disjointed thoughts” that denote her resentment of her confinement; forced to stay in a place against her will while longing for those she cannot be with (Bennett, 1994, p. 45; Sebo, 2021, p. 112). Like Freawaru, she is alienated from the community which she describes as cruel people (*wælreowe weras*) (l. 6). Her lamentations, or “lyrics of complaint”, as termed by Marsden (2015, p. 387), imply a self-perceived exile epitomised by emotional loneliness in which she is concurrently surrounded yet isolated. Again, there is a sense of loss of agency. Despite the woman’s strong will, she is unable to influence her circumstances. She also expresses a spitefulness for the fragility of the marriage stating, “one easily breaks what was never whole – the riddle of us two together” (ll. 18–19).⁵ If it can be assumed that Freawaru’s characterisation was intended to embody the same sentiments as the narrator of *Wulf and Eadwacer*, then the poem leaves her facing a future marred by not only her grief but of disempowered loneliness magnified by her proximity to those who caused it.

However, in the case of Hygd, her detachment from society following the death of her kin is not something forced upon her but is a voluntary decision. Leonard Nei-

² “heaðowylma bad laðan liges; ne wæs hit lenge þa gen þæt se ecghete aþumsweoran æfter wælniðe wæcnan scolde”.

³ “wiflufan æfter cearwælmum colran weorðað”.

⁴ Bradley (1888) was first to identify *Wulf and Eadwacer* as a female voiced piece, noting similarities to the exilic poems of *The Wife’s Lament* and *Deor*.

⁵ “þæt mon eaþe tosliteð þætte næfre gesomnad wæs – uncer geidd geador”.

dorf contends Beowulf's homecoming speech constitutes a "sophisticated rhetorical performance through which the hero proclaims his fitness to rule Geatland" (2021, p. 183). However, reading such ambition into Beowulf's character undermines the royal authority wielded by Hygd. First introduced as a queen who occupied a prominent position in the court of her husband, Hygelac, Hygd is remarked for her public participation at court, particularly in the tradition of treasure bestowal. However, after Hygelac's death, Hygd, presumably due to her newfound emotional loneliness, steps back from her royal duties. As queen of the Geats and mother to the heir, Hygd is in a good position to manoeuvre for the role of regent for the young and inexperienced Headred. The poem implies not only that Hygd is a capable ruler, but also that her authority is respected and accepted by the Geats. Malone (1941, p. 358) notes:

The poet represents Hygd as having in her hands the bestowal of the Geatish throne. Such a state of things presupposes a woman of unchallenged authority, and such authority could hardly be hers simply as a widow of the King. Personal competence and a devoted following would seem to be necessary implications here.

Nevertheless, Hygd chooses to offer the throne to Beowulf, who refuses and only reluctantly accepts the regency in her stead. Then, after the death of Headred, the Geatish throne is noted as passing directly to Beowulf. The poem makes no reference to Hygd having died, and earlier commentary on her youth and efficaciousness would suggest her to still be alive, having chosen voluntarily exile after losing first her husband and then her son. The voluntary relinquishing of her queenly roles and authority is seemingly connected to Hygd's emotional loneliness and her role as a mourning woman, in a similar sense to Hildeburh. However, rather than having her agency stripped from her, Hygd uses it to divest herself of the responsibilities of queenship.

Beowulf presents its queens as survivors; women who outlive their kin and communities and continue their lives remembering and reminding others of the losses incurred by conflict (Clover, 1986, p. 162). Their lives after such losses are characterised by grief, and an accompanying loss of formalised power, whether of their own volition or against their will. Their new role becomes that of the mourning woman and constitutes an exilic existence dominated by a newfound sense of loneliness in stark contrast to the social centrality and joyous prosperity they once held as rulers in a stable and flourishing community. Despite the relative silence on their fates compared to those of the poem's kings and warriors, *Beowulf* evokes a great level of sympathy and respect for its queens, praising their conduct and guiltlessness as enduring victims who carry the burden of survival in the aftermath of violence.

Historical Exile: Eadgifu

Like the queens of *Beowulf*, Eadgifu found herself at a nexus between feud and authority. In contrast to the queens of *Beowulf*, however, she did not find herself entirely bereft of kin. Indeed, the factionalism in which she participated was driven by internal conflict within the kin groups with which she was associated. Eadgifu

was the third consort to King Edward the Elder (r. 899–924) and had to contend with succession disputes involving her husband's older children. She is seemingly absent from the royal court for around fifteen years during the reign of her stepson King Æthelstan (r. 924–939). She does, however, return to the centre of power with her sons King Edmund (r. 939–946) and King Eadred (r. 946–955), before being driven from the court again during the reign of her grandson King Eadwig (r. 955–959), finally coming back to the fold toward the end of her life during the kingship of her other grandson, Edgar (r. 959–975). Here, there are observable patterns of exile that repeat in the reigns of other queens, most notably Ælfthryth (d. c.1000), Edgar's third consort, and Emma of Normandy (d. 1053), consort to first King Æthelred II, and latterly King Cnut (r. 1016–1035). England's pre-Norman royal women, no less than *Beowulf's* queens, are defined by their relationship to their male kin or, more specifically, by their relationship to the king.

Despite this, there are several key differences between historical queens like Eadgifu, Ælfthryth, and Emma, and a literary queen like Hygd. First is the redemption arc enjoyed by the historical queens. *Beowulf's* queens do not return to power, their exile is not temporary, but permanent. Second is that historical sources do not provide glimpses into a queen's emotive responses in the same way as literary texts. Again, it is quite probable that queens mourned the loss of their husbands, that Eadgifu, Ælfthryth, and Emma felt the loss of their kings keenly. Yet for the most part this is not made explicit; for most historical queens, emotional isolation cannot be demonstrated, only presumed. In contrast, patterns of social isolation and social loneliness are more readily observable across genres.

As would be expected of a royal consort, Eadgifu was of noble background, though little is known of her early years. When she married Edward c.919, she would have been around sixteen years old, her new husband approaching fifty. Edward died only five years later, leaving the young widow to contend with the political fallout with two sons under the age of five. That Edward's eldest son, Æthelstan, who would have been some years older than his stepmother, ascended to the Mercian and West Saxon thrones in the stead of his young half-brothers is of little surprise. Nor is it surprising that Eadgifu, as the consort of the previous king, served little role in her stepson's court. The question is, what can be said of Eadgifu's fifteen-year absence from the historical record?

The first thing to note is that, unlike the royal women of *Beowulf*, there is no reason to believe that Eadgifu did not retain the support of a network of nobility drawn from familial links. Eadgifu's return to power in 939 suggests that she did not spend the intervening years in penury. Moreover, it is known that by 937 her son Edmund was in Æthelstan's retinue at the Battle of Brunanburh, no doubt being prepared for power (ASC 937). The implication is that Eadgifu's social exile did not stem from personal enmity, but was simply a matter of practicality. There was seemingly resistance to Æthelstan's ascension to the West Saxon throne (Foot, 2011, pp. 17–23; Firth, 2017, pp. 86–8), and it seems likely the new king wanted to avoid Eadgifu and her sons becoming the locus for an opposing faction. To counter this, he may have encouraged his stepmother to withdraw from public life. Intriguingly, however, like Hygd, there may have been a voluntary aspect to Eadgifu's repudiation of queenly power. By this theory, put forward by Stafford (1981, p. 25) and Yorke (1988, pp. 73–4), Eadgifu's

retreat from public life was made in negotiation with Æthelstan. Despite ruling for fifteen years, Æthelstan seems not to have taken a consort or had any children, and it is probable that he was grooming his half-brother, Edmund, as his heir. There is no evidence that Edmund, his brother Eadred, or their mother Eadgifu, sought direct access to royal authority during Æthelstan's lifetime. Moreover, as Yorke highlights, the composition of the court between Æthelstan's reign and that of his brothers was little changed, implying a lack of factionalism in high politics. The sum of this evidence suggests an arrangement between the king and the queen-dowager whereby, in return for Eadgifu's absence from, and support for, his court, Æthelstan would ensure the throne passed to her sons.

Eadgifu's exile from court did not constitute complete social isolation, nor did it result in her loss of all agency. It is often suggested that Eadgifu is entirely absent from the historical record during Æthelstan's reign (Brooks, 1988, pp. 167–8; Stafford, 2004), but this minimises the charter known as S 1211. Dating to around 959, the document provides the ownership history of an estate at Cooling in Kent. Eadgifu had inherited this land from her father, who had mortgaged it for a loan of thirty pounds, which he repaid before going on the campaign on which he died. However, Goda, the man who had made the loan, claimed not to have received payment and proceeded to take practical ownership of the estate. While Eadgifu retained the landbook, or freehold record, and tried various means of asserting her ownership, it was not until Edward the Elder intervened, presumably after their marriage, that the matter was resolved to some degree. Edward seized not only the estate in question, but all of Goda's lands, handing their ownership and administration over to Eadgifu. The charter indicates that Eadgifu acted magnanimously, giving almost all of these back to Goda, though her primary consideration was likely to avoid creating a powerful political enemy. Sensibly, however, she retained possession of the landbooks to ensure Goda's loyalty, as well as a small estate at Osterland, in addition to her hereditary holdings at Cooling. The matter was fully resolved in Æthelstan's reign when the king interceded with Eadgifu on Goda's behalf. Eadgifu returned the landbooks, but retained the estates at Osterland and Cooling, while Goda swore an oath in Æthelstan's presence declaring that he considered the matter to be closed.

Three things can be drawn from this charter. Firstly, that Eadgifu entered her dowagerhood as a landholder. As such, her exile from the royal court and its community may merely have seen her relocate to an estate where she still held significant authority. There is also some indication that she became a lay associate of Shaftesbury Abbey after Edward's death in 924 (S 562; Kelly, 1996, pp. 71–2; Foot, 2000, p. 171). Either of these locations for her exile would have had the dual effect of providing for her personal security while removing her from the immediate proximity of court politics. Secondly, she retained some contact with court dignitaries, and there are other hints within the historical record that this may have been the case (Foot, 2011, pp. 56–8). While Eadgifu's dispute with Goda may be the only clear example of her ongoing involvement in court politics, Æthelstan's reign is, more broadly, poorly attested, and it may simply be that other examples of Eadgifu's political life during his kingship have not survived. Finally, Eadgifu had political agency. This could have derived from her vestigial authority as queen, or may be further evidence of a peace-treaty between the queen-dowager and her stepson. Regardless, Æthelstan

did not order Eadgifu's compliance or seek to forcibly seize the estates that had been Goda's, nor did Eadgifu entirely capitulate to the king's request.

In many ways, Eadgifu's second exile from court, in the 950s, is far clearer, her social isolation more complete. The animosity of her grandson, King Eadwig, is plain, as is the impetus for his rejection of his grandmother, namely that she was a part of a faction that supported his brother Edgar's claim to the throne (Jayakumar, 2008). This is also reflected in S 1211, where it is stated that Eadwig seized his grandmother's landholdings and, in the case of the Cooling and Osterland estates, turned them over to Goda's sons (see also B, 2012, pp. 74–7). It seems that in this instance Eadgifu was not able to retain the same level of agency as in her previous retreat from public life. She did still have allies; however, the realignment of Eadwig's court saw the rise of a new noble family in place of the previous networks in which Eadgifu had been embedded (Jayakumar, 2008, pp. 88–9). Her best-known allies, the church reformers Dunstan and Æthelwold, had their own interests and concerns at this time, limiting the practical support they could provide Eadgifu. Æthelwold sought to support Eadwig in his reign, and thus surely must have limited his contact with the out-of-favour queen-dowager, while Dunstan had backed Edgar for the kingship and, as a result, was himself exiled from English shores (ASC 956; Brooks, 1992, pp. 14–18; Firth, 2022a). Eadgifu may have enjoyed the support of her other grandson, Edgar, who would go on to claim authority in Mercia during his brother's lifetime (ASC 955; B, 2012, pp. 74–5). However, there is no evidence that this benefitted Eadgifu until after Eadwig's death; her exile from court during the years 955–959 was more-or-less complete. Perhaps in this moment, bereft of land and direct connection to the king, Eadgifu sought out the nunnery at Shaftesbury, her exile constituting a transition: from social integration at court, to social isolation from court, to social integration within a religious community. After Eadwig's death in 959, Edgar restored his aging grandmother's possessions (B, 2012, pp. 76–7; S 1211), and indications are that she once more became active in royal administration, but also that she never regained the influence she had in the reigns of her sons.

Eadgifu's second exile is notable for the patterns it shares with the periods of exile experience by the queens Ælfthryth and Emma. Both these women also found themselves in vulnerable positions on the death of the king, though in their cases the candidates they backed for the kingship were their sons. As observed in Eadgifu's first return to court in 939, being queen-mother came with a degree of authority, especially if the king was young. It also afforded protection against the political intrigues of opposing factions. In Ælfthryth's case, a number of the same players return. Allied with her in the succession dispute that arose on Edgar's death in 975 was Æthelwold, opposing her was Archbishop Dunstan. Dunstan supported the claim of Edgar's eldest son Edward for the throne, Æthelwold and Ælfthryth the claim of her eldest surviving son, Æthelred (Keynes, 2008, pp. 52–3). In 975, it was Dunstan's party that emerged victorious and Edward, soon to be known as "the Martyr", was crowned king. For the next three years, Ælfthryth was absent from the royal court, and seemingly retreated to her own estates. It was at one of these, Corfe, that Edward was assassinated in 978. Though contemporary records lay no blame on Ælfthryth, rumour of her involvement grew in later centuries (Firth, 2020). Her son Æthelred claimed the throne upon his brother's death and the youth, then about ten years old,

was accompanied by his mother. As Roach (2016, p. 77) points out, it was natural that suspicion would fall on Ælfthryth. No one had more to gain than the queen-dowager, who returned to the centre of power with Æthelred, claiming authority as queen-mother and queen-regent.

In 1035, Emma found herself in a similar position to Ælfthryth in 975 and Eadgifu in 955. Though she had legitimate sons with both Æthelred and Cnut, upon the latter's death the man on the spot to claim the throne was Emma's stepson, Cnut's child from his first marriage, Harald Harefoot (r. 1035–40). At this moment, in an unusual acknowledgement of emotional isolation, *Encomium Emmae Reginae* states that Emma "remained alone in the kingdom, sorrowing for the bitter death of her lord and alarmed in the absence of her sons" (Campbell, 1998, pp. 38–9).⁶ According to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles* (1035), while Emma had been given control of Wessex in the name of her absent son Harthacnut (r. 1040–42), this soon turned into a pseudo-exile in Winchester, as Harald claimed her wealth and increased her social isolation. Ultimately, in a more traditionally recognisable form of exile, Harald drove her from Winchester and Emma sought refuge in Bruges (ASC 1037; Campbell, 1998, pp. 46–7). There she was joined by Harthacnut and, while planning their reconquest of England, news of Harald's death arrived, with both then returning to England and to the centre of power (ASC 1040; Campbell, 1998, pp. 48–53).

Ultimately, Emma's rises and falls from power, like those of Ælfthryth and Eadgifu, were connected to the fortunes of the king, whether a husband, son, stepson or grandson. In a way, like the royal women of *Beowulf*, the stories of exile that attach to England's late Anglo-Saxon queens are stories of family. The integrity of their queenships and the exercise of their queenly authority was ensured by positive familial ties. In the absence of these, exile resulted, whether from the court, or to a nunnery, or to foreign shores. No matter the degree of political agency that such women were able to exercise at any moment, it was always situated and interpreted within a political network that was defined by proximity to the king.

Literary Loneliness: *Elene*

At first glance, Cynewulf's *Elene* might seem a peculiar subject for a discussion of exile and loneliness in medieval queenship. *Elene*'s departure from Constantine's court is voluntary. However, as demonstrated by the examples of Hygd and Eadgifu in her first exile, isolation is not strictly an involuntary phenomenon, nor need it be permanent. The value of *Elene*'s exile experience to this discussion is found in the counter-narrative it offers to those of the women already discussed. *Elene*'s exile is unconventional. She avoids many of the negative implications that ordinarily define the social isolation of women. Moreover, it is her exile that ultimately facilitates her empowerment, allowing her space to exercise agency and wield her authority with an autonomy not available to her in the confines of Constantine's court. *Elene* employs

⁶ "domina regina Emma sola remansit in regno dolens de domini sui morte amara et sollicita pro filiorum absentia". This glimpse of sorrow and alarm can be attributed to the panegyric nature of *Encomium Emmae Reginae* in relation to its subject.

this newfound autonomy in ways that combat her potential loneliness by fostering new bonds of community that simultaneously augment her personal authority.

Elene has been relatively overlooked by scholarly criticism, particularly concerning gender, when compared to other Old English poetic works. In 1998 Joyce Tally Lionarons suggested that the cause was a hesitancy to engage with the text's anti-Semitism (p. 51). Whether this suspicion is correct or not, *Elene*, both poem and figure remain understudied, with most recent studies addressing the work in conjunction with other texts (see Chance, 2004; Wright, 2011; Louviot, 2016). Regrettably, this is also the case here. Nevertheless, *Elene* offers an intriguing perspective on how, in the absence of the constraints of the court community, a queen may exercise and even grow her influence. As queen-mother in Constantine's court, Elene, presumably, already possessed significant prestige. Enough that she was trusted to lead the expedition to recover the Cross.

From her first mention at line 214b, Elene is contextualised by her departure from her son's court. The separation of Elene from the court is further emphasised by the ensuing description of that departure. Sea imagery is a common motif of Old English poetry, employed in varying contexts to conveying equally varied symbolism (Soper, 2017). In exile narratives, sea motifs routinely impress themes of social and emotional isolation, acting as a barrier between the individual and their community and signifying the distance between them (Tedford, 2012). Yet, where surging waves and turbulent seas would normally symbolise the internal turmoil of an exile, Elene is unhindered; she easily leads her ships over the waves, just as she is seemingly unburdened by the social loneliness normally inherent in exile. It might be argued that Elene's insusceptibility to the loneliness normally generated by social isolation is due to the presence of her retinue who accompany her on the expedition, effectively negating her exilic experience. Such a stance is implied by Stacy Klein who positions Elene within an imperial framework to affirm her subservience to Constantine stating:

With her son frequently in her thoughts, her own men always around her, and her regular correspondence with the imperial court, Elene is hardly ever alone or lacking in company (2003, p. 69).

However, from Elene's leaving of her son's court, she is only shown to correspond with or think of Constantine on one occasion: she sends envoys to inform him of the discovery of the Cross. It even takes another to suggest to Elene that she should forge the nails into the bit and bridle as a gift for Constantine (ll. 1167a–1175a). This hardly constitutes "regular correspondence" or constancy of thought during her prolonged expedition. Furthermore, the suggestion that Elene's retinue acted as a connection to Constantine, or that they provide Elene with a sense of community, is without material support from the poem's text.

The poem clearly identifies the warriors as Elene's men, acting under her authority on multiple occasions (ll. 692b; 713–715). There is no indication that they serve Constantine over Elene. Yet, neither does the poem imply that Elene finds in her men any sense of community. Though the text articulates the warriors' contentment under Elene's command by remarking on their joy and loyalty (l. 246b), Elene's

interactions with them are confined to the issuing of orders in a strictly hierarchical relationship. This distances her from her men in a way that suggests emotional isolation, specifically, social loneliness. Though constituting social interactions, the discourse between Elene and her men is devoid of the emotional bonds normally seen in lord-retainer dynamics that express kinship and community, and thus do not negate Elene's emotional isolation as we might expect. It is instead only mitigated when these bonds are displayed between Elene and the converted Jewish community.

By reading Elene's agency as merely that of a surrogate authority for her son, her relationship with the Jewish community is diminished to that of a "mediatrix". By this reasoning, it is only a temporary "displacement of gender norms" that allows Elene to exercise the masculine power of Constantine in his absence (Lionarons, 1998, p. 57). However, as noted, Elene's actions are further removed from Constantine and his imperial network than such a view suggests. Elene seeks no consultation nor approval for her decision-making during her expedition, issuing orders without invoking her son's authority as would be expected of a proxy. Furthermore, when the notion of surrogacy is dismissed, Elene's actions become more than merely mediatory in nature. She can be read as establishing a new community which is reliant on her, while also constituting a substitute for the kin group from which she is separated. Kaup notes that "group identity in *Elene* is flexible" (2018, p. 73), and Elene uses this flexibility to ward against the social loneliness of her temporary exile, fostering a new, extended community through the conversion of the Jewish population. It is with this newly forged community that Elene's interactions express the emotional bonds of kinship. She engages in the practice of gift-giving or, treasure bestowal, and is referred to as the people's queen (*peodcwen*) (l. 1155b), signifying her respected position in, and importance to, the community. This social connection is further underscored by the allegorical succession from Elene's earthly role as queen-mother to her spiritual role as *Mater Ecclesia* (Klein, 2003, p. 53).

In mitigating aspects of emotional isolation associated with social isolation, Elene establishes for herself the opportunity to exercise a new independence and authority away from court, where her isolation reflects her singularity and social elevation. Elene's distinction as a leader is heightened by her removed situation, for by "focusing only on a certain remarkable woman Old English poets systematically isolate that woman from other, more ordinary women" (Reider, 2019). In Elene's case, it also sets her apart from men through her separation from Constantine, the other ruling figure in the poem, and elevates her as superior in both her earthly and spiritual wisdom. Further, she is able to exercise her will upon others, using speeches and military power to achieve her goals, asserting her versatility as a political, spiritual, and martial leader, and establishing herself as a symbol of social order among her newly Christianised community.

Historical Loneliness: Æthelflæd of Mercia

The observed expressions of loneliness in *Beowulf* allow for some speculation as to the emotional responses of some of pre-Norman England's pre-eminent queens. In turn, *Elene*'s apparent subversion of this motif provides a glimpse of how personal

agency could offer women ways to assuage at least social loneliness, if not necessarily emotional loneliness. While it would be difficult to argue that achieving an apex of autonomous power could constitute a form of exile, it is certainly possible that, for many royal women, such power was accompanied by some form of loneliness. This is for two reasons. Firstly, a queen who gains regnant or regency authority following the death of the king needs to contend with the death of her husband. It is at times presumed that the marriages of medieval elites had inherent within them little attachment (van Houts, 2019, pp. 23–4, 87–122), an assumption derived from the fact that marriages were arranged with a view to political and dynastic strategies, not love. However, this did not change the fact that, for a queen-consort, the death of the king was also the death of an intimate partner, a family member, a political ally. Grief at such a loss can be reasonably presumed: emotional loneliness. Indeed, an expression of such has already been noted in *Encomium Emmae Reginae*. Secondly, the death of the king necessitated a period of court realignment. In the case of a queen-regent such as Ælfhryth, who seemingly ruled alongside Æthelwold during Æthelred's minority (Roach, 2016, pp. 77–90), this would be intended to establish strategic alliances and balance court factions to shore up her legitimacy. In the case of a queen-dowager, as observed at various points in Eadgifu's career, this would reflect the incoming king's need to do the same. Either instance would represent a disruption of the court community that could quite easily result in social loneliness for a queen in the absence of a familiar social network.

At first glance, it may appear a somewhat odd approach to analyse Æthelflæd (d. 918), the proxy-queen of Mercia in the early tenth century, through a lens of loneliness. Æthelflæd is one of pre-Norman England's foremost royal women. The date of her marriage to Ealdorman Æthelred (d. 911), who ruled Mercia as a *subregulus* under West Saxon authority, is unknown. However, by 901 the couple were working together to secure Mercia's administrative autonomy (S 221), and to bolster its defensive capabilities in the face of threats from the Welsh on Mercia's western border, and Scandinavian settlers to the north and east (ASC 907–918; Bassett, 2011, pp. 14–17; Firth, 2022b). In 911, Æthelred died and no move was made by Wessex to claim his authority, or by Mercia to install a male heir. Power transitioned directly to Æthelflæd, a scion of both the West Saxon and Mercian royal houses, who ruled in her own right until her death in 918. Æthelflæd's period of sole rule was marked by her establishing of numerous *burhs*, or fortified populations centres, by her reclaiming territories from Scandinavian settlers, and by her partnership in that project with her brother, the West Saxon king Edward the Elder. It is something of an extraordinary biography, even for a woman of noble birth, rivalling that of Cynewulf's fictionalised Elene. Yet it is also a sparse biography, dryly told in contemporary histories, with few windows into her emotions, except for a single entry in a text known as the *Mercian Register* for the year 917:

Her Æþelflæd Myrcna hlæfdige Gode fultumgendum foran to Hlæfmæssan begeat þa burh mid eallum þam ðe þarto hyrde þe ys haten Deoraby. Þær wæron eac ofslegene hyre þegna feower ðe hire besorge wæron binnan þam gatum. In this year, Æthelflæd, lady of the Mercians, with the help of God, before Lammas obtained the borough, which is called Derby, with all that belongs to

it; and there also four of her thegns, who were dear to her, were killed within the gates (ASC 917).

The implication here, just as in the description of Emma's emotive response on Cnut's death, is of grief. No such grief on the part of Æthelflæd was recounted at Æthelred's death. Indeed, across those texts that comprise the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, the *Mercian Register* included, descriptions of personalised emotional responses are extremely rare. This fits with the subjective annalistic style of the text. The question is then, why were the deaths of these four thegns so noteworthy? A first presumption must be that the relationship between Æthelflæd and the men in question was observably close to contemporary commentators, a second that her grief and emotional loneliness on their death was remarkable. Both tie to her widowhood and the court dynamics that would have resulted from the death of Æthelred. These thegns were likely brought to prominence by Æthelflæd after 911 to shore up her support at court, and they must have done so effectively to remain in her favour over the subsequent six years. Moreover, if proximity to power is judged alongside examples of other literary and historical queens, it is probable that the four thegns were from Æthelflæd's kin group. Grief at the loss of close allies and kin would be entirely understandable: the onset of emotional loneliness.

There is, however, more at play in this moment. The loss of four leading figures of her court would have shifted its dynamics: Æthelflæd would have had fewer people in her immediate circle that either knew her so well or with whom she was so close. Such a situation is very likely to have given rise to feelings of social loneliness. Though she was not bereft of community altogether, social loneliness is an aspect of emotional isolation which, as noted, does not require physical exile or a lack of company to manifest. Æthelflæd's experience is reminiscent of that of Elene and her social loneliness upon departing from Constantine's court, finding little community in the company of her men. This is only assuaged when Elene finds companionship in a community theoretically of her own making, that of the converted Jews. In this moment, Æthelflæd finds herself bereft of key members of the community of *her* own making, *her* court community. Thus, despite her victory, emotional loneliness *and* social loneliness were likely entwined in her affect, experienced so keenly as to have been observable and warranting of preservation in the *Mercian Register*.

It is a curiosity of the extant historical sources that Æthelflæd provides us a glimpse of a lonely queen, whereas known exiles such as Ælfhryth and Eadgifu leave no such impressions to perpetuity. This reflects the fact that, while exile and loneliness are interlinked concepts, they do not have to be causal. It is impossible to know how Ælfhryth and Eadgifu felt when their husbands died, when they were driven from the royal court, when social isolation set in. However, for the same token, it might be suggested that the emotional response of Æthelflæd to the death of her four thegns provides a model of behaviour that can then be assumed to apply to her fellow queens. This is especially the case if Emma's response to Cnut's death is also recalled (Campbell, 1998, pp. 38–9). The *Encomium Emmae Reginae* is designed to demonstrate her exemplarity and, as such, Emma's reactions to the death of her husband and the absence of her sons, manifestations of both social and emotional loneliness,

can be read as not only acceptable emotional display for a queen, but that which was expected of her.

Conclusion

No two examples of exile are exactly alike. Each royal woman discussed in this article experiences isolation and loneliness in different ways. In *Beowulf*, Hildeburh performs her emotional and social loneliness; Freawaru's emotional isolation is implied, but not demonstrated; Hygd's emotional loneliness prompts her withdrawal from public life. Yet all experience a form of exile, whether from the death of family, loss of kin, or disconsolate marriage. This is also true of the historical queens, Eadgifu, Ælfthryth, and Emma. Each experiences periods of exile from court, but each is distinct in its own way, responding to the political circumstances of the day. Unlike the women of *Beowulf*, however, for Eadgifu and Ælfthryth emotional isolation can only be presumed, not demonstrated. In contrast, *Encomium Emmae Reginae* and the *Mercian Register* present two exceptional glimpses into the internal emotional lives of two historical queens: Emma and Æthelflæd. The former makes explicit Emma's emotional isolation at the death of Cnut, the latter gives expression to Æthelflæd's sorrow at the death of her thegns.

In their turn, Elene and Æthelflæd demonstrate the importance of recalling that, while loneliness can be an emotive response to exile, the two ideas are not prescriptively causal. Exile, or social isolation, will not necessarily produce loneliness, or emotional isolation; meanwhile, it is perfectly possible to experience emotional isolation while in company. This may well be what is observed in Elene's distanced relationship with her men, and Æthelflæd's response to the loss of her thegns.

Yet, these distinct examples illuminate certain commonalities which permeate queenly experiences of exile and loneliness. Foremost among these is that, in every case, each woman's authority and presence at the centre of power is contingent on their relationships to their male kin. Even Elene's autonomy while away from Constantine's court is implicitly contingent on the degree of removal from her son and his centre of influence. More importantly, patterns of exile and loneliness can be observed as tied to queenly afterlives, most readily observable in the queens of *Beowulf* and in the lives of Eadgifu, Ælfthryth, and Emma. The death of the king or kin begets emotional loneliness (responding to the absence of a close individual), begets social isolation (exile), begets social loneliness (responding to the absence of community). While emotional isolation (loneliness), in truth, can only be hypothesised, the literary sources here examined suggest this is not an unreasonable thesis. To once more quote Lois Huneycutt, "used carefully, literary sources can also provide a window into the role of the queen..." (2003, p. 31). The motifs of queenly exile in Old English poetry, and their parallels to the experiences of late Anglo-Saxon queens, provide insight into how queenly lifecycles were perceived, into behavioural paradigms associated with phases of queenship, and thus into how England's historical queens may have experienced the phenomena of exile and loneliness.

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